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LIFE  
as a  
VAPOR

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JOHN  
PIPER



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To the children  
whose funerals I have done  
with gratitude for the painful lesson that,  
short or long, life is a vapor

You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.  
You are just a vapor that appears for a little while  
and then vanishes away.

JAMES 4:14, NASB



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# A WORD TO THE READER

The Son of God is not a vapor. He is solid reality, with no beginning and no ending. His name is Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday and today and forever. He looked His disciples in the eye and said without irony or exaggeration, “Before Abraham was, I am.”

But what about us? Once we were not, and now we exist? With the conception of all five of our children, that stunned me. Suddenly my wife is pregnant. A human has come into being. For how long? Forever. Either in heaven or in hell. There is no going out of existence. For that would not be joy for those who love God nor punishment for those who don’t.

You exist forever. There is no use protesting that you did not ask to exist and would like not to. That is not an option. You and God are both in the universe to stay—either as friends on His terms, or enemies.

Which it will be is proven in this life. And this life is a vapor. Two seconds, and we will be gone—to heaven or to hell. “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone” (Psalm 103:15–16).

Jesus Christ came into this world—this fleeting, fallen, fickle world—and did the greatest thing that will ever be done. As the perfect Son of God, He died in our place, absorbed the wrath of God, paid the penalty for sin, provided the righteousness of the law, and rose invincible from the dead—all in a vapor’s life of thirty-three years.

Because of that, we have something firm to grasp. “Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:7–8). The gospel is firm and lasts forever. My prayer is that these meditations on the Word of God will link you with eternal joy, and make the vapor of your life an everlasting aroma of praise to the glory of Christ.

*John Piper*

## DOES IT MATTER WHAT OTHERS THINK?

Life is too short to spend time and energy worrying about what others think of us. Or should we care about what others think precisely because that really matters in this short life? Should we be radically free from what others think, so that we don't fall into the indictment of being a "second-hander" or "man-pleaser," a slave to expediency? Or should we keep an eye out for what others think of what we do, so that we don't fall into the indictment of being boorish and insensitive and offensive? The answer is not simple. Some biblical texts seem to say it matters what others think. Others seem to say it doesn't.

For example, Jesus warned us: "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). And His own enemies saw in Him an indifference to what others thought:

“Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God” (Mark 12:14). Paul said that if he tried to please men he would no longer be serving Christ: “Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10). “As we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4). So it seems that Christians should not care much about what others think.

On the other hand, Proverbs 22:1 says, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” This sounds like reputation matters. And Paul was vigilant that he not be discredited in his handling the money he collected for the poor: “[We are] taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Corinthians 8:20–21, NASB). It mattered what men thought.

Paul taught the Roman church, “Now we who are strong ought...not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification” (Romans 15:1–2, NASB). And he taught that one of the qualifications for elders is that they must be “above reproach” (1 Timothy

3:2), including among unbelievers: “He must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:7).

Similarly Peter charged us to care about what outsiders thought: “Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12, NASB).

Question: How is the tension between these two groups of passages to be resolved?

Answer: By realizing that our aim in life is that “Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20, NKJV). In other words, with Paul, we do care—really care—about what others think *of Christ*. Their salvation hangs on what they think of Christ. And our lives are to display His truth and beauty. So we *must* care what others think of us *as representative of Christ*. Love demands it.

But we ought not to care much what others think of us for our own sake. Our concern is ultimately for Christ’s reputation, not ours. The accent falls not on our value or excellence or virtue or power or wisdom. It falls on whether *Christ* is honored by the way people think of us. Does Christ get a good reputation because of the way we live? Is the excellence of Christ displayed in our lives? That should matter to us, not whether we ourselves are praised.

Again notice a crucial distinction: The litmus test of our faithfully displaying the truth and beauty of Christ in our lives is *not* in the opinion of others. We want them to see Christ in us and love Him (and thus, very incidentally, to approve of us). When John the Baptist said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30), he spoke for every true Christian. We must insist on being less than Christ. I am vigilant, as far as it depends on me, to be less than Christ to others.

But we know others may be blind to spiritual reality and resistant to Christ. So they may think more of us than they thought of Him. Or they may think less of us than they think of Him, *not* because they think well of Him, but, as Jesus said, “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matthew 10:25). They may think He is a devil and we are worse. Jesus wanted men to admire Him and trust Him. That would have been their salvation. But He did not change who He was in order to win their approval. Nor can we change who He was, or who we are in Him.

Yes, we want people to look on us with approval when we are displaying that Jesus is infinitely valuable to us. But we dare not make the opinion of others the measure of our faithfulness. They may be blind and resistant to truth. Then the reproach we bear is no sign of our unfaithfulness or lack of love.





*Father, at times the way of Christ is complex  
to our sin-stained and finite minds.*

*Forgive us for the times we have justified  
our vanity in the name of a good reputation.*

*O, Lord, grant us, in this brief life,  
the wisdom and courage  
to please others, or not to please others,  
for the sake of Christ alone,  
and not our own praise.*

*In Jesus' name,*

*Amen.*

*Two*

SUFFERING, MERCY,  
AND HEAVENLY REGRET

When I think of the atrocities in the world, like the genocides of the twentieth century, it makes me want to live my short life on earth with as few regrets as possible. Germans killing Jews during World War II (6 million); Turks killing Armenians, 1914–1915 (1.5 million); Stalin killing 60 million people in Russia during his Communist regime in the 1930's and 1940's; the Khmer Rouge killing Cambodians, 1975–1979 (2 million); Saddam Hussein's troops killing Iraqi Kurds, 1987–1988 (100,000); Serbs killing Bosnian Muslims, 1992–1995 (200,000); Hutus killing Tutsis, 1994 (800,000); Americans killing unborn children, 1973–present (40 million). There were others.

Add to this the suffering owing to natural disasters like the tropical storm in November 1970 that killed about

400,000 people in Bangladesh, or the earthquake of Gujarat, India, in January 2001 that killed 15,000, or the AIDS epidemic in Africa that has taken the lives of 2.5 million people. Then add the sadness and pain and eventual death of your own family. When I think on these things, it makes me tremble at the prospect of living a trivial, self-serving, comfortable, middle-class, ordinary, untroubled American life. I can't keep eternity out of my mind. Life is short and eternity is long. Very long. It is a long time to regret a wasted life.

Which raises the question: Is there regret in heaven? Can regret be part of the ever-increasing, unspeakable joy of the age to come, purchased by Jesus Christ (Romans 8:32)? My answer is yes. I am aware of promises like Revelation 21:4, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." But I don't think this rules out tears of joy, and it may not rule out regretful joy.

Why do I think this? I do not see how we will be able to worship Christ and sing the song of the Lamb without a clear memory of the glorious, saving work of Jesus Christ and all that it involved. According to Revelation 5:9, the saints will sing "a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" But ransomed

from what? Will we have forgotten? This song and this memory will make no sense without the memory of sin. And the memory of sin will be hypocritical without the confession that it was our sin that Jesus died for.

It is inconceivable to me that we will remember our sin for what it really was, and the suffering of Christ for what it really was, and not feel regretful joy. The intensity of our joy in grace will be fed by the remembrance of our unworthiness. “He who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). But this does *not* mean we should sin so “that grace may abound” (Romans 6:1). The holiest will be the happiest. But it does mean that regret will not ruin heaven. There will be kinds of joys, and complexities of happiness, and combinations of emotions in heaven of which we have never dreamed.

But all this leaves me trembling that I not throw away the one short life that I will look back on for all eternity. Just think of it. You have one life. One very short life. Then an eternity to remember. Does not the suffering in this world seem inexplicable to you? Is not this great, global (and intensely personal) suffering a call to magnify the mercy of Christ by how we respond? Is not suffering a seamless fabric, stretching into eternity for unbelievers? And therefore, are not Christians the only people who can respond with helpful relief to the *totality* of misery? Unbelievers may relieve some suffering in this vapor’s breath of life on earth. But beyond that they are no help at all.

Shall we not then live our lives—and prepare for heaven—by strategizing in all our vocations, and with all our talents and all our money, to relieve suffering (now and forever) for the glory of Jesus? The twentieth century was the bloodiest and cruelest of all centuries. Man is not getting better. But God will hold us accountable in the age to come not for what others have done. He will call us to account for what blood-bought hope freed us to do for others in the name of Christ. We will give joyful and tearful thanks in that day for the grace that covered our sin and the grace that caused our love.



*Father in heaven, have mercy on  
the misery of this world.*

*Forgive us for our part in  
causing the pain of others.*

*Waken us as never before to the preciousness  
of your mercy bought by the blood of Christ.*

*Fix our hopes so fully on the joy of heaven,  
that we become the freest of all people on earth.*

*May our everlasting memories of your grace  
make us glad of all you changed  
and all you forgave.*

*In Jesus' name,*

*Amen.*

*Three*

THE EYE IS THE LAMP  
OF THE BODY

*A Meditation on Matthew 6:19–24*

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,<sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.<sup>22</sup> The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,<sup>23</sup> but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!<sup>24</sup> No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Sandwiched between the command to lay up treasures in heaven (6:19–21) and the warning that you can't serve God and money (6:24) are the strange words about the eye being the lamp of the body. If the eye is good, or healthy (literally, "if the eye is single"), the whole body will be full of light. But if the eye is bad, the body will be full of darkness. In other words: How you see reality determines whether you are in the dark or not.

Now why is this saying about the good and bad eye sandwiched between two teachings on money? I think it's because the specific thing about seeing that shows the eye is good is how it sees God in relation to money and all it can buy. That's the issue on either side of the sandwich meat of Matthew 6:22–23. In Matthew 6:19–21 the issue is: You should desire heaven-reward not earth-reward. Which, in short, means: desire God not money. In Matthew 6:24 the issue is whether you can serve two masters. Answer: You cannot serve God and money.

This is a double description of light! If you are laying up treasures in heaven not earth, you are walking in the light. If you are serving God not money, you are walking in the light.

Between these two descriptions of the light, Jesus says that the eye is the lamp of the body and that a good eye produces a fullness of this light. So what is the good eye that gives so much light and the bad eye that leaves us in the dark?



One clue is found in Matthew 20:15. Jesus has just said, in a parable, that men who worked one hour will be paid the same as those who worked all day, because the master is merciful, and besides, they all agreed to their wage. Those who worked all day grumbled that the men who worked one hour were paid too much. Jesus responded with the surprising words found here in Matthew 6:23, “Is your eye bad because I am good?” (ESV margin, a good, but perplexing, literal translation).

What is bad about their eye? What’s bad is that their eye does not see the mercy of the master as beautiful. He gives generously to those who worked only an hour. The all-day workers see it as ugly. They don’t see reality for what it is. They do not have an eye that can see mercy as more precious than money.

Now bring that understanding of the bad eye back to Matthew 6:23 and let it determine the meaning of the healthy eye.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,  
<sup>23</sup>but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

What would the healthy eye be that fills us with light? It would be an eye that sees the Master’s generosity as more

precious than money. The healthy eye sees God and His ways as the great Treasure in life, not money.

You have a healthy eye if you look on heaven and love to maximize the reward of God's fellowship there. You have a healthy eye if you look at Master-money and Master-God and see Master-God as infinitely more valuable and desirable. In other words, a healthy eye is a valuing eye, a discerning eye, a treasuring eye. It doesn't just see facts about money and God. It doesn't just perceive what is true and false. It sees and assesses the true difference between beauty and ugliness, it senses value and worthlessness, it discerns what is really desirable and what is undesirable. The seeing of the healthy eye is not neutral. When it sees God, it sees God-as-beautiful. It sees God-as-desirable.

That is why the healthy eye leads to the path of light: laying up treasures in heaven and serving God not money. The healthy eye is a single eye. It has one Treasure. God. When that happens in your life, you are full of light.



*Gracious Father of light,  
give us eyes to see Your worth.  
Heal our blindness. Save us from the  
deadly disease of seeing the world  
as worth more than its Maker.  
Restore the capacity of our hearts to cherish  
infinite beauty and savor infinite sweetness.  
Deliver us from the deadening effects  
of thinking this short life is the main thing.  
In Jesus' name, we pray,  
Amen.*