

Constant vigilance!

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[0 : 0 0] This morning's reading is taken from Luke chapter 12, beginning at verse 35. Be dressed, ready for service, and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks, they can immediately open the door for him.

It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.

It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. But understand this, if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Peter asked, Lord, are you telling this parable to us or to everyone?

The Lord answered, Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?

[1 : 3 5] It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

But suppose the servant says to himself, My master is taking a long time in coming, and he then begins to beat the men servants and maid servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk.

The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

That servant who knows his master's will, and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants, will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment, will be beaten with few blows.

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. And from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

[2 : 5 3] Amen. Not so long ago, I saw these T-shirts for sale.

Jesus is coming. Look busy. Now, I don't think that I would ever buy such a T-shirt, and you may or may not think that that's an amusing slogan, but I think it's an interesting idea to consider.

What would you want your life to look like if Jesus came back tomorrow? Perhaps you'd be tempted to try and fool Jesus by a last-minute burst of good behaviour, to offset what's gone before by being extra good now.

It's said that the great reformer Martin Luther, that he was once hoeing his garden, when a man came and asked him what he would do if he knew Jesus were coming back that same day.

Luther apparently replied, I'd just keep on hoeing my garden. Now, if I asked you that question today, what would you do if you knew Jesus were coming back this afternoon?

[4 : 03] Or if I asked you today, perhaps you'd feel fairly happy saying, yes, I'd do the same as always. But what if I came and asked you that question on Monday morning, or on Friday evening?

Would the answer still be, I would do the same as I'm doing? Now, there is an extent to which we shouldn't necessarily expect the answer to be, I would do the same as I'm always doing, because we do think about things differently, depending whether we're doing short-term planning or long-term planning.

That's been a joy for Joanna and I, a joy knowing that we're going to be living in the same house for more than a year or two, and actually thinking about furniture that works in this space, not just how can we squeeze things in.

You do plan a fortnight's holiday differently to how you plan a weekend away. The length of time for things does make a difference. Maybe we'd all have planned somewhat differently back in March if we were thinking then in terms of six months, rather than a few weeks.

So we think differently, depending whether it's a day or two, or a much longer period. But when did you last think about Jesus coming back at all? When did it last occur to you that actually he could return in your lifetime, let alone return tomorrow?

[5 : 20] Some friends of mine, when they got married, they had a little bit inserted into the marriage service. For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. To love and to cherish.

Till death do us part. Or Christ returns. A minor thing, perhaps. But a helpful reminder that it could happen in my lifetime and in yours.

So how would your life be different if you knew Jesus was coming back at the end of this year? Or the end of this week? What would you do differently? In the context of the preceding verses here in Luke's Gospel that we looked at last week, those verses telling us that we don't need to worry about what we'll eat or drink or wear, because we've been freed from those worldly cares, because we trust in the fatherly care of God.

In that context, maybe there's a danger that the disciples, a danger that you and I might be enticed by the temptations of this world, tempted into laziness or self-indulgence.

And to that temptation, Jesus says, well, we should spend our time here profitably in readiness for his return. Jesus has a lot to say about how we should think about the coming of that day and how we should prepare ourselves for it.

[6 : 42] There's warnings and encouragements for all of us here. Whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, however you stand before God, there is something important here for you to think about.

In these verses, we're waiting for the master who expects his servants to be ready. We're waiting for the thief who comes unexpectedly. And we're waiting for the master again, the master whose managers must be diligent.

So first, in verses 35 through 38, we have the image of the servants waiting for their master to return, and he expects them to be ready for his coming.

If you're wondering, by the way, what dressed ready for service refers to there in verse 35, the words behind that phrase are loins girded. That's because the typical attire of the time is this long flowing garment that's potentially quite inconvenient if you want to move with any speed or for a particular purpose.

And so in order to prepare for a journey, to prepare for battle, to prepare for service, you gird up your loins. You gather up the garment and belt it up out of the way.

[7 : 52] You get out the way so your legs are free to move, and so on. Now, in the translation, be dressed ready for service, this is a good translation because ready for service is the idea that Jesus is conveying.

However, knowing the idea behind that actually points us back into the Old Testament. This phrasing of loins girded is reminiscent of Exodus chapter 12, which is part of how God tells his people to prepare for their journey out of Egypt.

They're to eat the Passover meal with their cloaks tucked into their belts, their sandals on their feet, and staffs in hand. It's the same language, cloaks tucked into their belts, loins girded.

It's the same idea. They eat the meal ready for the journey because they trust God's promise that he will bring them out of slavery in Egypt. And the same idea comes through here in Luke chapter 12.

The final redemption that Jesus is pointing ahead to here is going to be reminiscent of the redemption of the Exodus. The Exodus, remember, is definitive for God's people.

[9 : 05] This is who they are. This is their identity. The people whom God brought out of slavery in Egypt, God had saved them, and he promises to do so again. And God's people have to be ready for that day.

We must be equipped. When verse 38 says that he might come in the middle of the night or toward daybreak, the point is that the master has the right to expect that his servants will be ready for him even if he's later than expected.

You might think he will come in the early hours of the night, just a few hours past dark, but he could be much later than that.

And so too, God expects his people to be ready for him. Jesus expects us to be ready for his return even if it is later than expected.

And after 2,000 years, I think it's probably true to say he is later than most people at the time expected. And yet still we are exhausted to be ready for him.

[10 : 09] There's a couple of things to notice in those verses. It's also well worth noticing the promise of verse 37. Did you notice there what will happen for those servants who are in fact properly prepared?

Those who are waiting when their master returns, they will be greatly rewarded. In fact, there's going to be a reversal of roles that the master will now wait upon the servants.

These verses that we're considering today contain not only warnings about the danger of being unprepared, but also promise blessings for those who are ready for his return.

The second image Jesus uses here, moving down to verse 39, this makes a similar but slightly different point. The focus shifts away from the idea of a delay to kind of complete unpredictability.

The thief comes when he is unexpected. See, when we ask when will Jesus return, why do we do that?

[11 : 13] Why do we want to know? Well, it's because we want to be ready for it, isn't it? I mean, if you've got relatives coming to stay, you want to know when they plan to arrive so that you can get extra food ready for the right number of meals and you can make sure the bathroom is clean.

I mean, that's assuming you can remember back to what it used to be like when we were allowed to have relatives coming to stay. It's been said, it's been said that the Queen thinks everything and everywhere smells like new paint.

That's just what the world smells like. Why? Because when people know that she's coming, suddenly everything gets cleaned and tidied and most likely freshly painted too. When you know somebody's coming, you get ready.

The roads are swept. There's new bulbs in all the street lamps and beautiful flowers everywhere. When somebody's important's coming, we want to be ready on time. And in Matthew's lead up to some of these same comments from Jesus, he recalls the disciples asking, when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

Why do they ask that? Well, I don't think they want to know when Jesus will come back just for the sake of it, just so they can sit there smug knowing they have all the answers.

[12 : 28] No, they want to know so that they can be ready. But here in verse 39, that plan is not going to work. Understand this. If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he wouldn't have let his house be broken into.

You also must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. They can't just predict when he's going to come. Now, sometimes we look at the stories and the pictures that the Bible uses and they're completely alien into our experience, aren't they?

You know, not many of us work as shepherds in our day to day. They are closer to the land in many ways than most of the societies that we live in at the moment.

But not so this image. This one works just as well today as it did then, doesn't it? If you'd heard that someone was planning to come and break into your house on a particular night, and in fact you knew even pretty much what time they were coming, well, you'd be there watching, waiting for them, phone in hand with two nines already pressed and an itchy thumb on the third.

If you knew what time they were coming, you'd be ready. But if all you knew was that someone was planning to break in sometime this month, sometime this year, well, you can't sit there waiting every night, can you?

[13 : 49] You have to get the burglar alarm and maybe a couple of guard dogs. If Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected, then we can't just prepare for one particular moment, can we?

We must be constantly vigilant. Maybe we can be helped too by a slightly different picture. Imagine you're doing the kind of job where you're mostly working on your own, but you know the boss could wander by at any moment.

Again, casting your mind back to when we used to work in offices instead of at our kitchen tables. Part of the motivation to focus on the work that you're doing, part of the motivation comes from needing to get tasks done and a desire to do a good job.

But if we're honest, I suspect in many offices a significant part of what keeps people working hard is knowing that the project manager might walk by at any moment and see what we're spending our time on.

Certainly my experience as a young engineering graduate, if I knew the project manager was going to come by every hour on the hour, that's pretty easy to work around, isn't it? Just make sure for those five or ten minutes that you look busy and goof off as much as you like the rest of the time.

[15 : 00] But if you could come at any moment, then you have to work all the time. Behind our questions about when Jesus will return often lies a desire to get away with as much as we can and then look good at the last moment.

Well, Jesus tells us that just won't work. we need to live in the light of his return all the time. Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected, so be constantly vigilant.

And we're playing with live ammunition here, aren't we? What's at stake isn't a telling off from the boss for slacking off, not even the risk of getting fired.

The risk isn't a hole made in your wall and your property stolen. No, as John Calvin puts it, we dread rather a deadly wound to ruin our soul unless we are on our guard.

Folks, there aren't higher stakes to play with. There's nothing more serious than this, being ready for Jesus' return. And therefore, thirdly, Jesus calls us to be diligent while he's away.

[16:17] Remember that t-shirt slogan, Jesus is coming, look busy. I think that's what most of us kind of want to do. Just look busy so he'll be pleased and for as short a time as we can get away with.

I think a better slogan would probably be Jesus is coming, be busy. Not look busy, be busy. Jesus isn't going to be fooled by a splash of new paint over crumbling walls or swiftly changing the computer to a spreadsheet when you see him out the corner of your eye.

Jesus could come at any moment, it will be sudden and unexpected. We are not going to have six months' notice. We will not see him out the corner of our eyes before he sees us.

So if we're alert to Jesus' return all the time, what does that actually look like in the day-to-day? Because it doesn't mean waiting by the door ready to dial 999, but I think there's a few clues in these verses, especially as we turn to the last section to verses 42 through 48, when Jesus asks and answers this question, who is a faithful and wise manager?

What does it look like to be a servant of Jesus in the light of his return? This third section, it's introduced by Peter asking in verse 41, Lord, are you telling this parable to us, i.e. to the disciples, to the twelve, or to everyone?

[17:40] And Jesus doesn't directly answer that question, but instead he introduces this parable about the wise manager and the other servants. which I think, I think functions to give the answer yes, but not exclusively.

Yes, it is to the disciples particularly, but certainly not to the exclusion of others. The parable kind of sharpens the focus on those with greater authority, greater responsibility, just like the disciples had in those early days, and perhaps as church leaders have today.

The closing verses make it quite clear, don't they, that the greater your knowledge, and the greater your responsibility, the more you will be held accountable. But these verses also make it clear that no one is excluded from the application of these parables.

Even the one who doesn't know, yet does things deserving punishment, he is beaten. Maybe that sounds unjust to you at some level, but please note that the man in question here is a servant of the master in this parable, which means he has every opportunity to find out his master's will.

He could know what the master wants and do it. So the fact that he doesn't know is his fault. He doesn't have to stay ignorant. He's responsible to take steps so he is not ignorant.

[19:04] It's a fundamental principle of most legal systems, isn't it, that ignorance of the law is no excuse. And that's God's position too. Leviticus chapter 5 verse 17, If anyone sins and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands, even though they do not know it, they are guilty and will be held responsible.

You are responsible for finding out what is required of you. And therefore we have this parable with the servant cast as either faithful and wise or wicked and selfish.

three things to pick out from this parable. Firstly, very briefly, we see again Jesus makes this point that the timing is unknown. It could take longer than expected even to the point of people like this manager starting to act like it will never happen at all.

We don't have to look far to find people who don't believe that Jesus' return is going to happen at all. Secondly, main character in this story is this servant, this manager who's characterised first as wise and faithful and then characterised as a wicked man.

And when he's faithful, when he does the tasks he's given by the master and the master is pleased when he returns. And verse 43 tells us it will be good for that servant. Blessed is the servant whose master finds him doing as he should.

[20 : 24] A person will be made happy by God, will be entrusted with greater authority in the longer term, not just when the master is away. And as we've said, the most important thing about this faithful, wise manager isn't that he's the one in authority over the other servants.

The point is that this servant does the task that is assigned to him. The servant set over his fellows must treat them well because that's his task.

And if he turns from that task and abuses his position, if he beats the other servants, then on his return the master will not be pleased. The other servants also have their assigned tasks.

The master will surely be no more pleased with their laziness, with them shirking their responsibilities when he returns. And the same is true today, isn't it? We all have an assigned task.

It may not be as upfront and as obvious as some other tasks, but we all have a different role to play in the church in this world.

[21 : 30] If you don't think you have a task given to you from God, well, I suggest you might do well to look a little bit harder and think it through. But also, just remember back to the very beginning of the Bible.

In Genesis, Adam and Eve and through them the whole of humanity was given a task to care for and to be in charge of the whole world in which they were placed.

Even if you don't think you have any other tasks, you have that one. And if the servant in charge's instructions in the light of Jesus' return were to do his existing job faithfully and well, to not shirk his responsibilities, if that was the instruction for that servant, the same is true for all of us.

We're called to fill our roles faithfully and well, knowing that if we're tempted to set aside our responsibilities, well, Jesus could return at any moment.

Third thing to note, this comes when the servant's recast as a wicked man. Verse 45 asks, what will happen if the servant abuses his position, if he's not faithful with what he's been given?

[22 : 39] Verse 46 is painfully clear about what will happen to him. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.

He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. There have been some misunderstandings here. Some have thought that because in both cases this man is referred to as the servant of the master, that these must both be referring to true Christians, that some Christians will be rewarded in the final judgment and some, whilst they might scrape into heaven, they'll kind of get sent to heaven's naughty step, as it were, where there'll be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth, as Matthew puts it.

Well folks, that is one of the worst corruptions of the Christian message that I have ever heard. But sadly, I have read it in serious books and I have heard it preached from pulpits.

And it's a profoundly sad way of viewing things. I think what's behind it is that people are trying to downplay the seriousness of the punishment by saying that it's just a less nice part of heaven.

But folks, this doesn't fit with any of the rest of the Bible's teaching on heaven and the new creation. Never mind the Bible's teaching on hell, it doesn't fit with what we know about heaven.

[24 : 07] Because this is a place where Revelation 21 tells us God will wipe away every tear and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. How can you read that in Revelation and then still think that verse 46 is referring to somewhere in heaven?

It's baffling to me. Now the point is not that some of Jesus' followers will be less well-off than others. The point is that some, even of those who might have appeared to be followers, will be utterly condemned, cut to pieces, and assigned a place to the unbelievers.

There are only two categories of people as far as God is concerned. There are those who are rebelling against him in their attitudes and their actions each and every day.

And there are those who are trusting in the salvation that Jesus offers. Those who've cast their sin upon him as he died on the cross. There are those who when God looks at them, instead of seeing their rebellion, he sees Christ's perfection.

And so if we pull together the three elements from this parable, if we pull together the unexpected timing of Jesus' return and the reward for the faithful and the punishment of the wicked, if we pull these together then we find ourselves in a situation like the one described by the ancient Rabbi Eliezer.

[25 : 29] He taught his disciples, repent one day before your death. Tempting prospect, perhaps. The idea being, well, have as much fun in the meantime as you can and then get in good with God at the last moment.

Jesus is coming, look busy. And maybe that is a tempting prospect. Maybe some of you teenagers, maybe you're looking forward to the day when you can move out of home and you can do whatever you like.

Maybe you're looking forward to Freshers' Week, to that freedom to go out and to celebrate, to meet new people, to do whatever you like with those people, to have fun for a few years at least, and then, well, repent later on.

And maybe some of us as adults, maybe some of us we're still living like that. We're still focused on what we can enjoy here and now, like that servant abusing his position.

Maybe we tell ourselves that we'll deal with the consequences later on. Enjoy it while you can. The diet and the repentance, they can start tomorrow.

[26 : 39] This is a new idea. Augustine of Hippo, the 4th century bishop, not always the elderly bishop you see here. Before he got to that stage, he once prayed, Lord, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.

He knew that his life of lust and indulgence, he knew it was wrong, but he didn't want to leave it yet. He clung onto it. He knew he needed God's forgiveness, but he didn't want to turn away from his sin because he liked it.

We want, we want just a little more enjoyment, a little more, before, or at least so we tell ourselves, before we will repent and turn to God.

We'd be delighted to follow Eliezer's advice and repent one day before our death. And yet the problem with this is quite obvious really, isn't it?

When Rabbi Eliezer's followers asked him, how will we know what day that will be? Well, he replied, all the more reason to repent today, lest you die tomorrow, or we might add, lest Christ return tomorrow.

[27 : 57] lest you die tomorrow. So folks, folks, if you haven't done that, if you haven't repented, if you've never had faith in Jesus, if you haven't accepted and received the free gift of salvation that Jesus offers, today is the day.

Boys and girls, don't think this is something that grown-ups do. This is for now. Make that commitment. Don't keep putting it off. Don't tell yourself you'll worry about that when you're older.

Don't tell yourself that if you're eight years old. Don't tell yourself that if you're 80 years old. Don't tell yourself this is a problem for tomorrow because you do not know.

So if this, if this repentance, this faith, this receiving of Jesus' gift of salvation, if that is something you need to do, please, please do it today.

And I would love to talk to you about that. Guys, we can meet in the garden, we can meet on Zoom, and if you've got questions that need answering first, well, we can talk those things through.

[29 : 16] But don't think we'll do that another time. Don't think we'll wait until we can meet over coffee. Folks, we might not get to the point where we can sit inside and have coffee.

Let's sit in the garden, please. Friends, whatever it's, whatever it's going to look like for you to put your trust in Jesus, whatever it might cost you to do that, friends, if you have unfinished business with God today, today is the day to begin in obedience to him.

It's going to be a few hours from when I say this to when you hear this. I pray you do hear it. Pray to Jesus now.

And get in touch with me. We can talk it through together. If you're not sure what you're doing, if you're not sure what this involves, speak to me, please. And for some of you, maybe you're thinking you're not sure anymore about whether you're trusting him.

You once thought you were trusting him, but lots of other things have crowded in and it's hard to tell now where you stand with him. Well, folks, the solution is the same.

[30 : 32] Turn to him in obedience. Ultimately, you don't need to worry whether you were a Christian before and got pulled away a bit or you never really were a Christian and are coming. Now, just turn to him in faith and obedience now.

He has promised to receive all who come to him. So come and then be faithful with what he's entrusted to you. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you promised to accept those who come to you in repentance, in faith, who recognize you as both Lord and Savior.

Thank you for that gracious promise. Lord, impress the necessity of that on all our hearts today. Where we have drifted away from you or never come to you in the first place.

Where perhaps we are hearing for the first time the solemn reality of punishment for those who are not yours when you return. Lord, make these truths abundantly clear to our hearts, we ask.

[31 : 48] Draw us to yourself because in you we find life and in you alone. Amen.

Amen.