

Being Watchful

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[0 : 00] Now, one of the privileges I have of being a pastor is that I get to marry people. Marry them, not me.

God willing, I hope never to have to plan another wedding myself. But as a pastor, it gives me joy really to see others do that.

And you can see it in the eyes of the couple. You can sense the excitement in their voices. How they go to great lengths, for example, to design their wedding invitation.

Or the amount of time they spend choosing the song list for their dances at the reception. Or how they want to find that unique thing that they will do for their wedding, which no one has ever done before and no one will ever do again.

That makes their wedding sort of, you know, that special. Now, I know some Christians frown on elaborate weddings because, you know, it's over the top, wasteful and indulgent.

[1 : 01] And yes, there's always the danger of that happening. But on the other hand, weddings are joyous occasions, aren't they? They mark the start of a lifelong commitment, we hope, which would reflect Christ and his church.

And so there's a sense in which generous celebrations are called for. And it's really no surprise then that if you look across the world, most cultures are into big weddings.

Extravagant, elaborate, and sometimes lasting for days. And that's the case with Jewish culture back in Jesus' day as well. Now, maybe the weddings didn't go on for days, but they certainly went long into the night.

It's rather unlike how we have our reception venues nowadays, is it? Where the bar, they tell you, closes at 11 p.m. sharp. The music stops at 11.30, and then the waiters give you that none-too-subtle hint, clearing the tables and rolling up the tablecloths, even while you're dancing on the dance floor.

But not so in Jesus' day, which is why in this parable, the master cannot give a fixed time to his servants for his return. It could be, as he says, in the middle of the night, or even approaching daybreak.

[2 : 21] And yet, he still expects his servants to be waiting for him. You see, at that time of night, the streets would probably be dark and unsafe.

The doors of the house would be secured from the inside. And when the master returns home, he wants to be let in straight away, instead of standing there, being left there to knock on the door forever and a day.

And further, as he steps into the house, he doesn't want to enter a house that is pitch black. He may still need to unwind after the excitement of the party, prepare himself for bed, perhaps have a late-night cuppa.

So then, the lamps still need to be burning. And unlike today, you can't just flick the switch, can you? Rather, the oil in the lamps needed to be topped up.

And so, this is the scenario that Jesus compares with his own return, with his second coming. So, that's what we read in verse 35, if you look there with me.

[3 : 29] Jesus says, Be dressed ready for service, and keep your lamps burning, like servants 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. Truly I tell you, 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 middle of the night, or toward daybreak. 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. Now, there's actually two stories here, but it's the same instruction at both the start and end of Jesus' teaching in this section.

And it's really, to be ready is the instruction, when Jesus, the Son of Man, comes. Be ready even when we don't know the time of his coming. And be ready even when the hour of his coming is unexpected.

[4 : 41] Now, I have to admit that I'm a rather impatient kind of person. I do find waiting difficult. For example, if I had to pick someone up from the station after work, I grow impatient if I arrive to discover that the train has been delayed.

Even though I can see on the platform exactly how long the delay is. Five minutes. I would have told myself, if only I'd known, I would have saved myself five minutes back at home.

But worse is when I don't know what time the train this person is on. When they say to me, you know, I might be on the 6.04 p.m.

or the 6.17 or maybe even the 6.34. Now, I don't know about you, but I would find that so frustrating. And yet, that seems to be how Jesus says his return will be like.

The Bible doesn't tell us when. He may even come when we least expect it. And yet, we're to be ready when he does. Now, God in his wisdom has not given us the reason why.

[5 : 54] We just have to trust God on that one. But if you have a temperament like mine, then you may despair a little at the thought of having to be ready, even when you don't know when.

I mean, how are we going to keep it up? Are we meant to be sitting at the front door with our bags packed, with our shoes on, looking out the window, and just waiting?

What if he comes when we just nod off for a minute? Well, thankfully, Jesus tells us in the next section that that's not what it's like to be watchful and ready.

We don't have to drop everything in life and just sit by the door to wait for him. Instead, to be ready is to be faithful and wise, serving and living for him while we await his return.

Now, before Jesus gets into that in verse 42, Peter actually asks him a question in verse 41. Lord, are you telling this parable to us or to everyone? And Jesus doesn't answer him directly, but hopefully by the end of the passage, the answer will be clear.

[7 : 05] Instead, this is how Jesus 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?

It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. And so Jesus gives here the two aspects of being ready at his return. First, he says we are to be wise.

That is, we need to know what to focus on in life, what our priorities should be, given that Jesus may come any time. So what are these priorities?

Well, if you don't yet know who God is or whether he exists, or whether what he says in the Bible is true, then that should be your priority to work out whether it is true and who God is.

Because there wouldn't be time to work that out when Jesus returns. But if you do know that what God says is true and that the only way to him is through his son Jesus, then the next priority is to turn to Jesus in repentance, to become a disciple.

[8 : 13] And again, time is of the essence. You wouldn't be able to do that if Jesus returns. So don't say, let me wait until my kids are older and I've got time, or wait until I've qualified in my profession, or until I've retired and got my finances in order.

If you are wise, then it dictates that you will act now. Now, if you're already a disciple, then wisdom also dictates that our priority should be to have a right relationship with God.

So here's some perhaps challenging questions for you to consider. Are you secretly living in a way that displeases God?

For example, are you being unfaithful in your marriage? Or are you cheating others of their money? Or are you addicted to something, gambling, pornography?

Or is there unresolved conflict and a failure to forgive others? Because just consider this for a moment. What if Jesus came back today?

[9 : 27] How would you react? Or would you be scrambling, trying to put all these things in order in the last minute, just so that you'll be ready to face the Lord? Or would you have a clear conscience?

Because if there's anything that you're ashamed of today, then can I suggest that if you're wise, you will attend to these now before Jesus returns. Now, it's not that we are to be perfect and flawless.

No, the Bible tells us we're presented holy and blameless before God because of what Jesus has done on the cross, because of His blood, not because of what we've done. But rather, the point is, is our conscience clear?

That is, are we honest before God and in right relationship with Him? And more importantly, are we listening carefully to His Word and submitting to it and allowing Him to shape us by His Spirit?

Further, if we knew that Jesus could return any time, then wisdom dictates that we prioritize the gospel. That is, we pray for people to know Jesus, including those we love.

[10 : 35] We give, we support gospel ministry, and then we consider the part we can play ourselves to share the good news, because just as time is of the essence for us, so time is also of the essence for them.

Well, second, in addition to wisdom, the other thing that Jesus says of the manager is that He is to be faithful. The manager is both wise and faithful. And this means not simply knowing the priorities, but consistently living it out, doing so week in, week out, until Jesus returns.

And that can be a real challenge, can't it? Because being faithful is not always exciting, is it? In fact, it can be rather mundane, just doing the same things week in, week out, over and over again.

Like turning up to church, like caring for one another, like sharing the gospel even when we get brushed off, like praying and waiting for God to answer, or reading the Bible regularly, even when we've already read it before, and even when we can memorize some of the verses.

And yet, when we are focused like that and living like that, then what we do is we remain fixed on Jesus. Our eyes remain fixed on Him. Not a day goes by when we are not following Him or considering what He would want of us.

[12 : 01] Because the moment we take our eyes off Jesus, then our focus turns on to something else, doesn't it? And that distracts us. And when we're distracted, we're no longer ready, are we, for Jesus to come.

Now, lest you think this is all too hard, in our final verses, Jesus now gives us the consequences. And to put it bluntly, the stakes are high because Jesus' return will bring a time of final judgment.

Back in the Old Testament reading we had today in Daniel, we read that God had already revealed that at the end of time, there will be a great separation for judgment.

So I've got the verse, verse 2 back up on the slide. It says, Maltitude who sleep in the dust will awake. And here's the separation. Some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting contempt.

And Jesus picks up this theme in His parables. So in the parables of the weeds, the parables of the net, both in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks about this big separation as well.

[13:09] So I've just put up the parable of the net, which is the shorter one. And there Jesus says this, Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore.

Then they sat down and collected the good fish in the baskets, but threw away the bad ones. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous, throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And so there's going to be a general judgment when Jesus returns. And those who are in the kingdom will be separated from those who are not in the kingdom. Now here in this passage in Luke, I think Jesus is talking about a similar thing, but with a slightly different focus.

And as we read it, I think we'll discover the answer to Peter's question, who Jesus is talking to. It will become clear, I hope, that Jesus is speaking to those who actually know about his return.

And they know what to do as a result. These are servants who know that the master will return and have been given responsibilities by him.

[14:26] So let's continue in verse 44. Jesus says, Truly I tell you, he will put him, that is the one who is faithful and wise, in charge of all his possessions. So these will be rewarded in the judgment.

But suppose the servant, the one who knows what the master wants of him, says to himself, My master is taking a long time in coming and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, 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.

So it's pretty clear, isn't it? This parable is for the disciples or more specifically, it's for those who consider themselves to be disciples of Jesus. Now if you're a disciple of Christ and you are faithful, then Jesus offers us great encouragement, does he not?

He says that when he comes, he will reward our perseverance or faithfulness. He will put us in charge of greater things, whatever that might be. In fact, earlier in verse 37, he's already mentioned something even more wonderful, I think, because he says that when the master returns late at night, even though the servants are dressed and ready for service, the master himself will turn the tables on them.

[15:51] He himself will dress to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. Now that's a wonderful picture, isn't it?

It's us thinking, oh, when the Lord comes, we're ready to serve him, but actually Jesus turns it around and says, no, no, no, don't worry about serving me. You take a seat and I will serve you now.

Now, Jesus, of course, has already done that on the cross, hasn't he not? He served us by dying for us. But here at his second coming, he will continue to serve us by lavishing on us the full glory of his inheritance.

Now, we will be treated like royalty by the Lord Jesus himself. But as is often the case with us frail humans, it's not enough to just have this little carrot for us, is it?

Because Jesus then goes on to give us the stick as well. That is, there will be judgment if we are not ready for his return. And in the parable, Jesus gives one specific example of a so-called servant who isn't ready.

[16:59] He's the type who abuses the authority his master has given him. So instead of apportioning the food to the other servants, he beats them instead and eats the food himself and gets drunk.

Well, for this person, Jesus says that upon his return, the master again will reverse the situation. This servant himself will now get his own beating or worse, be cut up to pieces and assigned with the unbelievers.

And we have already seen with the parable of the gnats, the fate of unbelievers is that of weeping and gnashing of teeth. But actually, if we look further in these last two verses, I think Jesus goes further actually because he says that the judgment of a supposed disciple who falls away is actually worse than someone who doesn't know in the first place.

Someone who is simply an unbeliever. So, what he says in verse 47, it says, The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows.

But the one who does not know and does things deserving of punishment, yes, still be punished, still be beaten, but with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.

[18:21] And from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. Now, there are certain things here which are not easy to understand, but I think the drift of what Jesus is saying is probably clear and that it seems clear that there will be degrees of punishment.

Now, I think the beatings are figurative, so Jesus is merely mirroring the beating that he's talked about in the parable, the servant dishes out to the others. And we can only speculate what this difference in judgment might be, but whatever the judgment, we can say that if we know more and we know what is expected of us, then the judgment will be greater if we fail to do it.

We will be judged according to what we know and what responsibilities we've been given as a result. So how might that apply to us?

Well, I think in the very first instance, the fact that you've read this passage and you've heard Jesus' warning gives you knowledge that not everyone has.

So you're the one who does no more. And so you will be judged by how you respond to it. If you decide to ignore these words because perhaps you think it's not true or Jesus doesn't mean it, then you need to be confident of that when you go and face the Lord Jesus.

[19:45] Are you confident about that? Or perhaps if you're not yet a Christian, you might want to investigate further to see what Jesus really says of himself is true.

That's why we have things like Christianity Explored, the course that Harry talked about. Come along and find out. Next, for those of us who are disciples, then know that Jesus will hold us to account for what we do know.

We have to take Jesus' call to be faithful seriously. Because sadly, there are many aren't there today who claim to be disciples, but then are very blasé about their faith.

They think that because they've been baptized or they call themselves Christians, perhaps they've grown up in a Christian home, that all will be well. Even though, Jesus says here, it's clear that how they live, whether they're prepared or not for Jesus' return matters.

And third, I have to say that as we grow in our faith as disciples, then I think Jesus calls us to live to a higher and higher standard. So those of us who think we're leaders or who are leaders or teachers of the word, we will be held to a higher standard.

[21 : 07] There are other verses in the Bible like James chapter 3 and verse 1 and Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 17 that say the same thing. So those of you who think you know the Bible well, you have the right reform theology, how are you living up to the wealth of knowledge in the Bible?

And I'm not just talking about how often you read the Bible, how often you pray, how often you come to church. But how does your life measure up to your supposed right theology, your godliness and holiness?

Are we gracious? Are we humble? Do we show patience to those who we think are more sinful than us? You know, when we face God in the judgment one day, Jesus is not going to compare us with one another as if to say, oh, you know, I'm a better Christian than he is.

Because he's a younger person in faith. No, Jesus will say, with the knowledge and the responsibilities I've entrusted to you, how have you been faithful to those?

Friends, let me ask you this question in closing. Do you think Jesus is going to return tonight? Do you think 5th of May 2019 is the day of Jesus' second coming?

[22 : 39] Now, I'd say most of you would probably say, no. And yet, what does Jesus say? He says that the Son of Man will come at an hour that we least expect.

And so, if you don't expect him to come tonight, that's probably a good indication that he may come tonight. It's a bit counterintuitive, isn't it?

But, what Jesus is saying is, we need to be prepared. We can't think, oh, he's coming and then we're prepared. No, actually, it's the time when we least expect him, that is when he might turn up.

Now, we all know that food inspectors never tell restaurants when they turn up for inspection, right? And that's a great thing for us customers, isn't it? Because we don't want to go to restaurants, you know, we want them to, we want to go to restaurants that maintain the highest hygiene standards 365 days a week, don't we?

But imagine if inspectors published their inspection schedule. You know that, what is it? Food Republic, 6th of May inspection.

[23 : 45] Indochine, 8th of May. What do you think would happen? The restaurants will only be vigilant 24 hours before the inspection. Isn't it? Now, I suspect that's one reason why God has not told us when Jesus will return either.

Because he wants to keep us on our toes. He wants to develop genuine faithfulness that is always ready 365 days a year. He wants to help us to constantly focus our eyes on Jesus and be ready.

And we may feel like, oh, that is just an impossible thing to keep maintaining all that. But God promises that he will give us the strength to do that by his spirit.

And the other thing is, God also gives us one another to help us do that. Because as we gather each week, we're actually helping each other to stay watchful.

When we come together, it may seem boring and mundane, but we're actually doing a very vital thing for one another. We're helping each other to be ready for Jesus' return.

[24:55] So I want to encourage you to keep meeting together, to keep coming together to pray and to study God's word and to keep reminding each other that Jesus may come back today.

Well, I'm going to end now and just give you a minute to just take stock and to ask yourself this question, are you ready for Jesus if he came back today? Or do you think you may have some honest business to do with him?

Perhaps change some priorities or habits in your life? So I'll give you a minute to do that and then we'll pray together. Father, we ask that you help us to be ready and faithfully serving you as we await your son's return.

Humble us and show us where we may be lacking in readiness. Give us the resolve to change our ways. If we have relationships to man, give us the courage to do so.

Father, we do this not because we need to be perfect before we meet you. We do this because your son Jesus has already made us pure and blameless before you. And we merely want our lives to reflect what we've been given already.

[26:05] this great gift of salvation. Help us to be faithful to the calling to which you've called us. This we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.