

Luke 12:35-39

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[0 : 00] Good evening. Let's pray together. Lord, we do pray that you would be glorified through us, and I pray that you'd be glorified through me and these words that I speak.

I pray that your word would speak to us, and I would love you more for having heard from you. In the name of Jesus, I pray these things. Amen. I want you to imagine with me, or better, remember with me, if you've had an experience like this, a situation you may have experienced while taking a road trip.

You're on the highway, driving along at your usual seven miles an hour above the speed limit. You know already that you're not going to arrive at your destination on time. And suddenly it becomes clear to you that in a quarter mile, the highway is going to fork.

And that one of the options holds the promise of getting you to your destination not so very late.

And the other one will mean a 20-minute detour out of your way, and you're not sure which one to take.

So you inquire. Which way do I go? You ask your navigator, who took his eyes off the road and onto Facebook for a bit too long. Let me check, he says.

[1 : 22] And you speed toward the decisive point. Which way do I go? You ask again. Just a second, your navigator says. Your stress levels spike through the roof.

Your mind is filled with unholy rage at the fact that you ever let this navigator be your friend, which is a problem you will soon remedy. Left. No, right. No, left, he says.

And as you follow his direction and take the left exit, you are distraught to hear those two words coming from your GPS that signal you took the wrong turn recalculating route.

In our passage for tonight, Jesus speaks of precisely this sort of decisive, dividing choice. But the stakes are infinitely higher here than they are in following road directions.

Our passage for tonight is Luke 12, verse 35 to 59. I'm going to read the whole passage together.

And as we read this passage and meditate on it tonight, I want us to see one thing.

[2 : 26] Christ divides. So let's read that passage together. Luke 12, 35 to 59. Jesus said, Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.

Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table and he will come and serve them.

If he comes in the second watch or in the third and finds them awake, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into.

And you also must be ready for the son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Peter said, Lord, are you telling us this parable for us or for all?

And the Lord said, Who then is the faithful and wise manager whom his master will set over his household to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.

[3 : 49] Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, my master is delayed in coming and begins to beat the male and female servants and then to eat and get drunk 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 does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.

And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will

receive a light beating.

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required. And from him to whom they entrusted more, much they will demand the more. I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it were already kindled.

I have a baptism to be baptized with and how great is my distress until it is accomplished. Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house, there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided.

[5 : 09] Father against son and son against father. Mother against daughter and daughter against mother. Mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. He said also to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming.

And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, there will be scorching heat. And it happens. You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

And why do you not judge for yourself what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge and the judge hands you over to the officer and the officer puts you in prison.

I tell you, you will never get out of there until you've paid the very last penny. So, this passage has plenty of confusing material in it.

And so I want to walk through it bit by bit and then come back and meditate on what this passage means for us here today. We just read it in the order that it was written in, but I think that we can get a better sense of what's going on if we read it a bit out of order.

[6 : 25] I think the main idea of the entire passage is this startling claim that Jesus makes in verse 51. Do you think that I've come to give peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but rather division. I think that's the heart of the whole idea. I say this is startling because we have a temptation to emphasize that Jesus is a minister of peace.

He's a bringer of peace. And indeed, the prophecies that tell of his coming give us good reason to think that he does bring peace. Isaiah 9 calls him a prince of peace.

So, I don't want us to misunderstand Jesus here by saying that he comes to bring division instead of peace. Rather, I think he's saying that he comes to bring division so that we might finally have peace.

That is, a true peace, not a false peace. Jesus is the one who brings true peace by dividing. I'll return to that idea in a little bit.

[7 : 26] So, I think that's the central idea. He has inaugurated this division by his first coming and he is going to complete it at his second coming. So, he warns him in verse 40, you must be ready for the son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

What's he going to do? He's going to judge his servants, those who have been found faithful and those who have not been found faithful. He's going to divide them at his coming. This is the big idea.

He does this work of dividing through kindling the world with fire. Verse 49, I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it were already kindled.

A strange idea. But throughout the New Testament, this metaphor of fire is used frequently as a cleansing, purging force. Not a destroying fire, except against evil.

Our God is a consuming fire for all things that are evil. He comes to cleanse the world with fire. The function of Jesus purifying the world by fire is in fact a purification, not a destruction.

[8 : 41] Our God is a consuming fire, Hebrews tells us. Everyone's work one day will be manifest for the day of judgment will disclose it because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what sort of work each one has done, 1 Corinthians 3 tells us.

It's been predicted by the prophets over and over that Jesus will do this sort of thing with fire. Most closely, John the Baptist says this, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn.

With the chaff, he will burn with unquenchable fire. That's Matthew 3. So you see the same dynamic that John the Baptist is predicting there. He's going to purge the world with fire.

He's got a winnowing fork in his hand. A winnowing fork separates out the wheat from the chaff, the good usable produce of the earth from the unusable husks.

[9 : 43] So he's coming with fire to divide. Same idea that Jesus is speaking of here. Hundreds of years before John the Baptist prophecy, Malachi prophesies a very similar thing.

He says, behold, I send my messenger. Jesus, the Lord speaking through Malachi says, behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. So predicting the coming of the anointed one, the Messiah, this is a great day of great rejoicing for sure.

But then the verse immediately following is, but who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? He's like a refiner's fire.

He's like a fuller's soap. So do you see again? He's coming, but who can stand in his day? Why? Why is it a question? Who will stand in this day?

[10 : 45] Because he's like a refiner's fire. He's like a fuller's soap. He's coming to wash, clean the world and purge it by fire.

So Jesus comes to divide. He brings division on the earth through his coming. He does this through a cleansing fire. That's the heart of this text and the rest of it flows out of that claim.

There are two stories that bracket this idea and they illustrate what we ought to do given that there is a decisive moment of division and judgment that's coming.

These two stories, they bracket the central idea. They frame it like a picture frame. The first story is the parable of the servants of a house whose master is away at a wedding feast.

They know that their master is returning, but they don't know when. Therefore, Jesus says, they ought to be constantly ready so that they can be prepared for him when he returns.

[11 : 50] For at his return, he will make sure his house is set in order. And if it is, he will reward his servants. And if it's not, he says they will cut those servants in pieces.

Make them go with the unfaithful. This is no playful master who's coming back. This is a master who has a concern for the way his house is organized.

He will not let his house languish in disorder, but he will come and clean it. And similarly, the parable at the end of this passage is about going with your accuser to court.

The man is walking with his accuser to court. He knows he's guilty. He knows the judge is going to find out he's guilty. And what is he encouraged then to do? To make amends, to settle with his accuser before he gets to court.

So both of these parables are preparation parables. Something is coming for which you ought to prepare. And guess what? You're probably not prepared for it.

[13 : 00] That's the central idea. Those are the picture frames that bracket the central idea. What's the thing that's coming? Christ is coming to divide, to purge by fire.

So this passage then is about the warning of the second coming of Christ to cleanse the world. And now that we have a general sense of what's going on, the main moves of the passage, I want to spend the rest of our time tonight thinking about what this might possibly mean for us today.

I have four things this might mean for us. First, this passage is an encouragement to God's people because it tells us what he's doing in the world.

I was with some Jewish friends in Israel a couple summers ago and we got, as we always do, got talking about why they don't believe Jesus is the Messiah.

And they say to me, look, the text says that he will be a prince of peace. Does this world look like it's governed by a prince of peace? Therefore, he must not have come yet.

[14 : 17] Plausible argument, it seems to me. If he comes to bring good news to people, if he comes to make his people rejoice again and we look and we read the newspaper and that's not what we see, we might think that he's not the Messiah.

But this passage is comforting to God's people because it tells us why we do not yet see the peace overcoming the entire world. Why? Because he has come to divide.

Who among us has not felt at some time like his own life is out of control? That it's directionless? Perhaps even meaningless? And history itself equally meaningless?

What are we to do when we hear of famine in Africa or ISIS in the Middle East or Zika in South America or racism in New Haven? What are we to do with these things? What are we to do when the Bible makes the claim that Christ is a prince of peace and we do not see that peace? I think we ought to understand that God has introduced a sword into the world not because he is a God who loves violence but because this world is held by a usurper.

[15 : 34] There is a kind of peace that comes with tyranny. It's the peace that allows no kinds of quarreling at all because it's enforced by a sword.

It's a false sort of peace. Tyrants pride themselves on this sort of peace but the people are not free and the peace in that regime is not a true peace.

And Christianity says that this is the world that we live in that has been taken over by a usurper an evil one and that God has launched an invasion into this world.

He's launched an invasion into this world to purify for himself a people to reclaim those people for himself and to bring them home with him. That's what he's doing in this world.

So this world is redemptive in the midst of all of its pain. The peace the prince of peace brings we do not yet see.

[16 : 36] In this astounding passage Hebrews says that the Lord God has put all things into subjection to Jesus. But and then in the most astounding parenthetical we do not yet see all things put in subjection to him.

That could be the headline for the New York Times tomorrow. Headline things still not in subjection to him. Today the world not in subjection to him.

But this passage tells us what God is doing. It allows us to read the signs of the times. Do you see that bit there from 54 to 56? We know how to interpret the weather but we don't know how to interpret the times.

This interpreting the times knowing what God is doing in the world this is what Jesus would have us do. So the first function this passage plays for us is to encourage God's people about what he's doing in the world.

He's come to refine the world with fire. Paul in Romans speaks about these refining sufferings of the world like this in Romans 8.

[17 : 54] He says I consider that the sufferings at this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

For we know the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. The pains of the world are not the pains of a sickness leading to death.

They are the pangs of a pain leading to birth. New life. That's what God is doing in the world. And again, Paul applies this not only to the world but also to himself individually.

In 2nd Corinthians he says after confessing a few things he says that he has this terrible sentence of death in himself. He's under so much persecution and suffering that he counts himself as good as dead.

He says this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. This is what's happening in the history around us.

[19 : 05] It is not meaningless. The world is convulsing in the pains and the pangs of new life.

And we individually are through our sufferings being transformed into an image of glory. This is happening day by day.

That's the first in this passage does. The second thing I think is that it warns us of the coming division that Christ will bring. It warns us.

In the example I used at the beginning of this sermon, the problem with that fork in the road is that your navigator didn't see it coming. It snuck up on you. You're caught off guard.

But here Christ is warning all of us, be on your guard. God said if you're here tonight, you no longer can ever say that you did not know that Christ's return was at any minute.

[20 : 09] You are now without an excuse. Christ has told us that he's coming. He's advertising it to us.

And so what are we supposed to do? What are supposed to do in the face of this warning? Well, if you're here tonight and you've not yet made your decision to be with Christ, to claim him as master and be his servant and work in his vineyard, if you're not yet allied with Christ through faith, flee to him.

That is the main message of this text. he is coming, he is like a refiner's fire, he will purge the world of evil. And if we put on the jersey of evil rather than the jersey of Jesus, you will be purged.

This is a promise. Jesus comes and says this. Jesus himself, the docile one that the children play with, he talks about coming and purging the world in fire.

God the way we avoid this, Christianity teaches, is that we, as these songs sung, we claim Jesus' blood for ourself.

[21 : 33] We plead guilty. At the end of this passage, when we're going to the court with our accuser, we plead guilty. We make a plea bargain. And Jesus has come and said that he will take the penalty.

if only we trust in him, if only we have faith and believe in him. If you're not a Christian and you want to talk more about that, at some time, I'd love to talk to you after the service or the pastors would love to talk to you as well.

That's what you do in response to Jesus' warning if you are not yet a Christian. If you are a Christian, I think this passage is comforting to us because it gives us final hope that the sin that so easily besets us is doomed to pass away.

This is the third thing this passage teaches us. It's comforting to the Christian because it gives us final hope that the sin that so easily besets us is doomed to pass away.

Think of this metaphor that the prophets say about Jesus. He is like a refiner's fire. He divides between good and evil.

[22 : 45] And he does this not only for peoples, but he does it with the loves in our own heart. This world, Christianity says, is a mix of those who have claimed allegiance to Jesus and those who have set their mind against Jesus.

And so is all of our heart. Each of our heart is precisely that same sort of ambiguous mixture of good desires, of good love of Christ and love of neighbor, and of evil, perverted self-love, the desire to use other people around us manipulatively for our own benefit.

The refiner's fire is not only for the world, but is also for our hearts. If you are a Christian in this room, and you've been a Christian for any amount of time, you know what it is to fight your own sin. You know what it is to be in a battle with the world and the flesh and the devil. You know what it is to say, never again will I do this sin, and the next day to do that sin.

You know what it is to come to church Sunday after Sunday, repenting, hoping, praying that you never sin again, only to have to confess the same sin the next week.

[24 : 06] And the glorious teaching of the Bible is that one day those evil desires in your heart and mine that we fight with every day that easily beset us will be scrubbed away, will be purged in the refiner's fire, that we ourselves will be separated not only from other sinners, but from our own sin.

This is the message of Christianity, and this is why God's cleansing, purifying fire for us is good news. C.S.

Lewis writes a book called The Great Divorce. It's an allegory about heaven and hell, and in one scene, there's a ghost person, a person who may or may not have died, the imagery is strange. The important thing is a person has got a lizard on his shoulder, and this lizard represents lust, and it whispers into his ear over and over and over lustful thoughts. An angel comes to this man and says, do you want me to get rid of that?

Oh, yes, it has been annoying me for quite some time, that'd be quite nice. Okay, can I kill it? Can I kill your lust right here? And the man says, I don't know if I'm ready for that, I'm not quite sure, it might hurt.

[25 : 30] The angel says, it will surely hurt. I am a messenger of fire. And after some back and forth, the man decides finally that yes, he will allow the angel of fire to grab the lizard of lust off his shoulder that whispers lustful thoughts into his ear and break its back.

And when his lust is broken, that man ceases being shriveled up and becomes a strong and sturdy man. the lizard now dead is transformed into a stallion that the man gets onto and rides in the direction of the heavenly mountains.

The idea Lewis is saying here is that your lust keeps you away from God, but when it is broken, the love, the good love, is actually a vehicle to wing you on your flight to heaven.

And the good news of Christianity for Christians is that our warfare against our own sin will one day be over. He will cleanse us.

He will wipe away our sins and those evil temptations that beset us day by day we will be freed from. That's the third thing. And the fourth and finally, the thing that this passage teaches us, for those who are in Christ, this passage is an exhortation to continue waiting for his return.

[26 : 57] For those who are in Christ, this passage is an exhortation to continue waiting for his return. How much of your life and each of your days is spent eagerly meditating and waiting for the return of the Lord?

For myself, not so much. I'm far more interested in trivial concerns and cares. We find it difficult to wait for Christ eagerly.

it's difficult to wait for him eagerly because it's so easy to live lives forgetting about his promises of return. Do you find yourself to be like the man in the passage right before this one?

The man who builds bigger barns after a windfall crop. He concerns himself with his economic status rather than the condition of his soul. Jesus calls him a fool for being concerned about these sort of things to the exclusion of being concerned about his soul.

Maybe you don't care about barns and crops but do your thoughts run more often to paying bills or advancing in your career and less on preparing for this decisive day when Christ shall return?

[28 : 13] To meditate often on the return of Christ is to remind ourselves that a great reckoning is coming and we ought to spend our days in preparation for that reckoning.

for those who are in Christ we know that this reckoning will be a good day rather than an evil one. And so our hearts ought to be uplifted in desire for this day to come.

But there's another reason it's so hard to wait for Christ's return and I think it's just that we're just bad at waiting for anything for any amount of time. waiting through tribulation is hard.

We're like the servant in the night in Jesus' parable here. The night watches at 4 a.m. The servant who's tempted just to sit down on his cushion because his master is not home and is not coming home.

Do you remember ever trying to pull all-nighters? Do you remember how your eyes begin to close involuntarily against your control? How your brain begins to go on protest against you pulling any more information out of it?

[29 : 26] And is not waiting for Christ in this world like that? Our desires are low. We can't sustain a desire for him coming back very often or very strongly.

We individually have passed decades here on this earth and our earth has passed thousands of years since Christ's ascension and still we don't see him. surely then the temptation to think that he's not coming is great.

But if we would be faithful and heed the words of our Lord, we cannot allow ourselves to slip into imagining that he will not return.

We cannot allow ourselves to slip into thinking that our greatest concern is the building of bigger barns to hold our great harvest. Christ's promise of return is as sure as his promise that he has wiped away all of our sins.

And if we would believe him that he has wiped away our sins, we must believe him as eagerly and as sincerely when he promises to return. But will we not grow tired in waiting for the return of the Lord?

[30 : 48] I think we will. So how do we rouse ourselves awake again and again as the night watches pass and the nights grow darker and darker that we wait for the coming of our Lord?

Two things we can do to help us wait eagerly for the coming of the Lord. The first thing we can do is recall the faithfulness of God that we've seen in our own lives and in the lives of other Christians. Recall God's faithfulness to us in our own lives and in the lives of other Christians. This by the way is one of the reasons church history is really useful.

Seeing God's faithfulness not only across my own 27 years but across 2,000 years of church history has so inflamed my trust in Christ. again if you want to have a conversation about what church history you ought to read I'd be happy to talk to you about that.

We can recall the faithfulness of God that we've seen in our own lives and wait patiently because we know that those faithfulnesses are a down payment of his greater final faithfulness.

[32 : 05] The medieval theologian Bernard of Clairvaux in his exegesis of Song of Solomon he observes that the bride waits and pines away after her husband on the bed and as she waits for him she is refreshed in her desire and prevented from fainting by desire by eating the pomegranates of his garden and smelling the flowers there.

Bernard writes what are these pomegranates and what are these flowers? with these fruits and flowers the bride begs to be surrounded and nourished now. I believe that she does so sensing that the warmth of her love can easily cool if it's not encouraged and supported until she is led into her husband's chamber where she will be held in the long desired embrace and she can say his left hand is under my head and his right hand has embraced me.

This means that as long as the world lasts in which one generation is succeeded by another God's chosen ones will not be without the consolation of memory until they can enjoy the feast of God's presence.

So memory which is signified by these pomegranates is for the generations of people in this world the presence of God belongs to those in the kingdom of heaven and the memories of God's faithfulness are those on earth.

This generation on earth which is still on its pilgrimage to heaven is comforted in the meantime by memory. We remember the great works that God has done for us and we trust that those are the down payments of his future faithfulness.

[33 : 53] That's the first thing we do to help us wait. The second thing we do we trust not only in memories but in the promises. We look back and we look forward.

Look at the great promises set out here for us. Look particularly in verse 37. This is astounding to me.

When the master returns he does not demand that the servants serve him but rather this happens. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes.

Truly I say to you he will dress himself for service. He will have them recline at table and he will come and serve them. Do you get the vision?

This master has returned from a wedding feast. Perhaps his own wedding feast. He is overjoyed. He abounds in joy and rejoicing.

[34 : 53] And what does he do as soon as he sees his servants? He invites them to rejoice with him. He gives to them their food. He serves them.

The promise that we wait for at the coming of our master Jesus is for him to serve us. It would be blasphemy to say we're not the Bible so very clear that this is what we wait for.

Jesus himself will prepare a table before us. Jesus himself will not drink of the fruit of the vine, the wine of rejoicing and of grand marriage supper until we drink it with him.

Jesus himself prepares a house for us. Jesus himself shall fill his people with glad rejoicing by inviting them to his bridal feast.

The Christian in this life waits with eagerness knowing that the eternity that waits in front of us is not an eternity of being cajoled and commanded but an eternity of being wooed by the great lover of our souls.

[36 : 15] He will gird himself and serve his servants. This is a sweet grounds for our hope in the future.

But why does he tarry so long before he comes? I think there's a reason for this too. Note how Jesus specifies the time for these servants.

Verse 38. If he comes in the second watch or in the third and he finds his servants awake, blessed are those servants. Now I don't want to make too much about a parable right? In every parable you can't find something out of every particular detail but I think there's something significant about the waiting of the coming of the Lord.

Why does he wait? We live in an Amazon Prime world where we the first generation in all of human history can get almost any object with free two-day shipping.

This means we rarely have opportunities to wait and eagerly long for anything we want. We get frustrated when we have to wait 20 seconds for a YouTube video to load.

[37 : 32] How are we prepared to wait decades for the coming of Christ? Christ. When I was younger my parents would make Christmas a big deal.

They would start talking about it two, three months in advance. My sister still does this. In October and November her eagerness for Christmas is so profound she could explode.

You don't get that with Amazon Prime. And on Christmas Eve she is so excited for the coming of Christmas precisely because she has waited for so long.

This time of waiting has heightened her longing for the coming of Christmas. I think this is one of the reasons that Christ carries.

So that our desire for him might be heightened. Like those servants who the master returns to in the second and third watches at midnight and 3 a.m.

[38 : 34] They yearn for him to come back. Every hour they wait they yearn more and more for him to come back. The psalmist says something similar.

I wait for the Lord. My soul waits and in his word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchman for the morning more than watchman for the morning. The watchman a soldier set at his post all night long yearns for the morning and he yearns for it more at 1 a.m. than he did at midnight and more at 2 a.m. than at 1 a.m.

And as the waiting continues so also does his desire increase. I think this is one of the reasons why Jesus tarries.

Because only when our desires are high do we fully realize how desirable Christ is. The watchman, his aching body and fatigued mind cry out all the more for the dawning of the day.

And then at the pinnacle of his desire dawn. Light shall arise in the darkness for the upright the psalmist says.

[40 : 00] And so also will Christ come to all those who love him and desire his coming. Let's pray. Lord we do pray that you would give us the grace tonight to place our trust in you and faith in you so that as you come to divide the world we would not be on the side of those who have set our minds and hearts against you.

But we would be among those who eagerly desire your coming. And we pray that you would sustain us with memories of your faithfulness in the past and the promise of your coming to dwell with us forever in the future.

I pray that you would give us a renewed desire to see your kingdom come and your will be done on this earth. I pray that you would come quickly Lord Jesus and satisfy the desires of your people. In the name of Jesus I pray all these things. Amen.