

A Ready People

Luke 12:35-48

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 28, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

³⁵ “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹ “But know 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. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

⁴¹ Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” ⁴² And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? ⁴³ Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. ⁴⁴ Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. ⁴⁷ That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (Luke 12:35-48, NRSV)

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400 years is an awfully long time to wait. I can't imagine. I get impatient if the car in front of me doesn't move the split second the light turns green. But that's how long the Israelites had to wait for God to come to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. 400 years! Most of you know the story. Since the time of the patriarchs, when Jacob and his twelve sons ended up in Egypt as

refugees, generations came and generations went before God finally showed up to take them home. After all that time it's easy to see how they might have begun to wonder if they'd been forgotten.

But God did not forget them. And God did come. God sent Moses. And on the appointed night of deliverance, Moses told the Israelites that they needed to be ready. They were to *quickly* prepare a meal. They shouldn't even put yeast in the bread because there was no time to let the dough rise. Then this was how they were to eat the meal: “**Your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.**”¹ God was finally coming to deliver them from slavery and lead them to freedom in the Promised Land and it was imperative that they were ready to go when he arrived.

2000 years is also an awfully long time to wait. That's how long the church has been waiting for Christ to return and take us to the Promised Land. That is, after all, what Jesus said he would do. He promised his followers that at the appointed time he would come again and usher the Kingdom of God into the world, heaven at last come to earth. When Jesus instructs his disciples in Luke 12 to, “**Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit,**” he is bringing to their minds their ancestors in Egypt who long before received similar instructions. And these instructions were not just for them, but for all Christians, right on down to our time. It is imperative that we are ready when Christ returns.

So are we? Are you? Are you prepared to meet Jesus if Jesus returns today? That's the question at the heart of this teaching.

Jesus uses the analogy here of a master and his slaves to make his point. Picture the scene. It's late at night, nearly dawn, and the master is delayed coming home from a wedding banquet. Must have been one heck of a party. The slaves don't know when he is coming. He hasn't texted to let them know he's on the way. But they are ready nonetheless. They are dressed for action. In those days the men wore long robes that were not conducive for labor or even strenuous movement. These servants have tucked those loose fitting outer garments into their belts (girded their loins!) so they are ready to serve the moment the master

¹ Exodus 12:11 (NRSV)

arrives. Since their master will be arriving in the dark, oil lamps are filled and the wicks constantly trimmed to provide for him a well-lit path into the home. It would not be a good thing if the master, no matter how delayed he may be, arrives home to a dark house full of un-girded and sleeping slaves.

Remember that these slaves are really stewards, or trustees. They are running a household, but a household that does not belong to them. The rightful owner is the master, and he is away. And when the rightful owner returns, he will expect these trustees to be managing his household in the way he would want his household managed. It reminds me of when I used to babysit as a teenager. These parents would give me clear instructions on how I was to look after their household, especially their children, while they were away for dinner and a movie. There was always instructions as to what the kids could and could not do, when they should be put to bed, what was appropriate for snacking and watching. There were also usually instructions on what I could help myself to in the fridge or in the family room. Sometimes they told me exactly when they would be home. Other times they weren't quite certain. "We should be home sometime before midnight."

Even when a specific arrival time was given, however, there was always the chance that they could return at any time. The movie might have been sold out. The wife forgot her purse. The husband wasn't feeling well. A good babysitter, therefore, is always ready for the sound of that key in the front door. Because things will not go well if when the parents return they find the kids up an hour past their bedtime drawing crayon self-portraits on the walls of the dining room, me snuggled with my girlfriend they never knew was coming over watching a less-than-family-friendly movie on the big screen television, my dirty shoes up on the nice coffee table, and my hand digging into a gallon of ice cream I was explicitly told they were saving for a birthday party the following day. This scenario, by the way, is not based on actual events. But it makes the point. A babysitter is a steward, and a faithful babysitter tends the household exactly the way the parents would want the household tended even when the parents' return is delayed.

This is not our household. You understand that, right? As servants of Christ, we are stewards. Everything we possess does not ultimately belong to us. Our time, our knowledge, our possessions, our influence, our relationships, our bodies, even our very lives, all these are gifts placed in our hands for a time and there will come a day when all these things will be expected to be returned to their rightful owner. Since we do not know

when that day will come, we are told to always be ready.

Obviously, when Jesus first spoke these words he was still here on earth. In that context, therefore, when he tells his disciples to be ready for what is to come he is likely referring to the cross. All along he has been telling them that the Son of Man – that's him – must die and then be raised from the dead three days later. They don't know when this will happen, so they must be prepared at all times for it to happen. Jesus, in fact, speaks these words as they are on their way to Jerusalem where these events will unfold.

As *we* read these words today, however, we sit on the other side of those events. Luke is writing his Gospel to the church post-resurrection. Jesus' words, therefore, point *us* to the time when he will come again. And as is made clear here and in many other places in the New Testament, we do not know when that day will come. Christ will return at an unexpected time. Nobody will see him coming.

To be clear, when Christ does return it will mark the coming of God's Kingdom into the world in all its fullness. That's just a way of saying that at that time, all things in the cosmos will be finally set right again. What we have now only tasted in Christ will then come in all its fullness. There will be on that day no more injustice, no more pain, no more division, no more war or violence, no more sadness or grief, no more sin, no more separation from God or from one another, no more death. The transformation of the universe in that day will be so extensive that every picture you currently have in your mind of the Kingdom of Heaven is woefully inadequate and incomplete. No human mind this side of eternity can even begin to envision what the world will be like when it is finally and forever delivered from the curse it has been under since the beginning of time. All we can know is that there is no good thing on this earth now that will not then be made infinitely better on that day.

With this in mind, it's a wonder that we don't focus more on the second coming of Christ in the church. That's a mistake because it is a major focus in the New Testament. There are 318 verses in the New Testament about the second coming. 1 in every 13 verses mentions it. The New Testament itself ends, in the last verses of Revelation, with this prayer: "**Come, Lord Jesus!**"² We are sometimes shy about these matters because we have seen them so mishandled by the church so often. But the solution to so much bad teaching about the second coming is not to avoid the matter altogether, but to correct our teaching,

² Revelation 22:20 (NRSV)

especially in light of the fact that Jesus warns us here and elsewhere that we must be ready for that day when it comes!

Jesus throws in a bonus analogy here when he says that if a homeowner knew what time a thief was coming to break into his home, he would be ready. Now obviously most thieves don't let their victims know what time they are coming. The implication here, therefore, is that the homeowner must *always* be ready. The thing is, no homeowner is positive that that a break in is definitely going to happen. It may happen; it may not happen. In terms of Christ's return, however, there is a guarantee. *He is coming*. The timing of his arrival is uncertain but the arrival itself is a certainty. We must therefore live our lives in light of this coming certainty. We must be ready. Which, of course, brings us back to this question. Are we ready? Are you ready? Are you prepared to meet Jesus if Jesus returns today?

Peter himself wonders if the question is personal. He asks, **“Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?”** In response, Jesus, true to form, puts the question back on Peter. **“Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time?”** Peter should know by now that whenever Jesus uses an analogy or parable in his teaching, he is inviting his listeners to find themselves in the analogy or parable. It's always directed to them! We should know that by now as well. As we will see emphasized in a moment, this call to be ready for Jesus' coming is a call to all disciples for readiness, but especially for those disciples who are in positions of leadership in the church. Peter, therefore, needs to pay special attention. So do I, and those in positions like mine.

Blessed is the servant whom the master finds faithfully managing what belongs to the master when the master returns. That servant will be given even more responsibility in the master's household. Blessed is the disciple, therefore, especially the disciple put in a position of leadership and influence among other disciples, who is found at Christ's return faithfully carry out his or her calling. That disciple will be given a special place in God's Kingdom.

On the other hand, Jesus gives a warning to the servant who should know better, but who nonetheless finds himself tempted to become impatient as he waits for the master's delayed return. That servant begins to be filled with a false confidence that leads him to begin to imagine that the household is actually his to do with what he pleases. In the parable this servant even goes as far as to abuse the others servants. Therefore, when the master returns the punishment for this servant will

be harsh. You were probably taken aback by just how harsh Jesus says it will be. That servant will be cut into pieces and assigned a place with the unfaithful. Even the servant who didn't know better will be punished, though not as severely.

Jesus' point is clear. Disciples who do not handle that which Christ has entrusted to them according to his will are thus not ready to meet him when he returns and will, as a result of their disobedient unpreparedness, face consequences. Disciples in positions of leadership and influence in the church, those who really ought to know better but are still not ready, will face severe consequences. If you've been entrusted with much, much will be demanded of you.

We live in a flood plain. We are told that there is a likelihood that a day will come when there will be so much water that will come into this valley that our levees will not be able to keep it all within their boundaries. Those who spend their time studying these things have told us to be prepared. All of us, for instance, are supposed to have a 'go bag' ready at home. Batteries, flashlight, basic toiletries, rain gear, copies of important paperwork, extra food and water, cash to get by on for a few days. How many of you have a 'go bag' ready at home right now? It's a bit foolish not to, right? We have been warned. And yet, how do you know you'll ever really need it? There is guarantee that a flood will ever come. Some of you have lived in this neighborhood for decades and no flood has ever come. With prolonged inactivity comes false confidence. And you might be right. A flood might never come and that 'go bag' will then have been a waste.

Not so with Christ. Christ *will* return. It's not a question of 'if' but 'when.' And we are wise to believe Jesus when he tells us that he is coming *soon*. In Revelation 22:12 Jesus declares, **“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done”**³ And I know what people always think. Soon? It's been 2,000 years! Maybe Jesus is working off a different definition of 'soon'?

We need to change our thinking. I'm 52 years old. God willing, I might live another 40 years or so. I might not. Tomorrow is not promised for any of us. Here's the reality. One way or another, I am going to meet Christ in 50 years or less. He may return to usher in his Kingdom and we'll all meet him at once. Or I may come to the end of my earthly life and I'll meet him then. Either way, it is going to happen relatively soon for me. And for you as well. Augustine himself once said, “Fear whilst there is the time for fear. Far off

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indeed is the day of judgment; but every man's death cannot be far off; for life is short."⁴

You see, now is the time for making ready. Christ is coming again soon into our world. And we of all people have no excuses. We have been told. The scriptures are clear. In the church we must be a ready people. So what does that mean? How does this reality change us? It can't just be information, right? Jesus' message is meant not only to inform us but to transform us. If the babysitter realizes that the parents might come home any moment, or the neighborhood realizes that a break in the levee is imminent and a flood is coming, this is information that must lead to action, to transformation. So how does the reality that Christ is coming again soon change us? How do we make ourselves ready?

Let me suggest four ways Christ's imminent return ought to change us.⁵ There are probably more, but this is a good start.

First, Christ's imminent return ought to make us alert even in the most ordinary of circumstances. The writers of the New Testament lived with this alertness, almost as if they stood on their tiptoes straining to watch for the coming of Christ in history. Similarly, you and I ought to wake up each day with the conscious expectation that today could be the day that we meet Christ. If we seek him we will, in fact, meet him every day. Try this. Try praying every morning, "Lord, if today is my last day, then help me to be ready to meet you today." Pray that prayer in the morning and see how it changes your perspective on the day.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we should shut down everything, go sit on a mountaintop somewhere, and stare at the heavens in anticipation. In the middle of World War II, as millions of his fellow Brits were wondering how they should carry on with things as they lived under the imminent threat of Nazi bombings, C.S. Lewis wrote these words:

The first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are going to be destroyed by a bomb, let that bomb, when it comes, find us doing sensible and human things -- praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts - not huddled

together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs.

The imminent coming of Christ into our world ought not to paralyze us. We can be ready for his coming while still carrying on with the sacred, though ordinary tasks of everyday life. I can be just as ready to meet Jesus mowing my lawn as I can be ready to meet Jesus singing a hymn with the rest of you in church. In either place, I just need to be alert.

Second, Christ's imminent return ought to make us joyfully obedient. Not just obedient, but *joyfully* obedient. Yes, there are rules and commandments Christ has given us to follow in the meantime in this life. Be cheerfully generous with your money, but do so in secret. Never take vengeance. Be kind. Always show hospitality. Don't judge others self-righteously. Forgive when others offend you. Act in loving ways towards your enemies. Walk an extra mile with your oppressor. Show compassion to the homeless, the refugee, the prisoner, the friendless.

There are specific ways Jesus wants us to live, but we are not meant to follow Christ's commandments out of fear, afraid that if we don't we will get punished when he shows up in the end. No, we are to obey Christ out of joy because we have come to trust that the boundaries and directions we have received from him are given to us by the One who is the creator of all things, knows all things, and loves all things, and is therefore able to direct us in the best way to live. Furthermore, when we obey Christ's commands we begin to live life in the ways that life will one day be lived fully in the Kingdom. That means that when the world sees the way Christians live, by grace and according to Christ's teachings, the world is given a glimpse of what life will one day be like for all who come to receive the gift of life that Christ extends to everybody.

Third, Christ's imminent return ought to help us to forgive freely and to love radically. When somebody in the world wrongs us, our instinctive response is to get even, or at least to get justice. In doing so, we can feel as if we are, in a way, doing God's work. Did you notice, however, that Jesus never taught his disciples to seek justice in that way? It's too big a job for us, for one. How are we, people who also are guilty of doing wrong to others, going to be the ones in charge of making sure other guilty people get what they have coming? You see the hypocrisy there?

This is why Paul writes in Romans 12:19-20, "**Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written: 'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, says the Lord.'** On the contrary, 'If your

⁴ Cited by Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1990), 530.

⁵ I'm indebted in part here to J.D. Greer in the following article on The Gospel Coalition website: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-ways-jesus-second-coming-changes-us-now/>

enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head.”⁶ If Christ is indeed coming soon we can trust that he will mete out justice in the ways it needs to be meted out. That sets us free then to forgive those who wrong us and even to love those who are our enemies. Justice will be carried out in due time, but by the only one worthy of carrying it out.

Fourth, Christ’s imminent return certainly ought to give us hope in the midst of suffering. As theologian Cornelius Plantinga says, “The return of Christ is good news for people whose lives are filled with bad news.” There are some of us in this room who have had to endure a great deal of bad news in this life. Some of you are in the midst great hardship even now. And I know that some days it may seem like you can’t take much more. But we must not lose hope. There will come a day when Christ will return and all things will be set right on that day.

Paul encourages us in II Corinthians to remember that, **“this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight glory beyond all measure.”**⁷ Your heart will not be heavy with grief forever. The cancer will be healed. The pain in your body will someday go away for good. The addiction that torments you will be destroyed. The demons which seem so relentless will be cast out once and for all. Remember these words from Teresa of Avila? “In light of heaven [which comes to earth when Jesus returns!], the worst suffering on earth will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.”

So are we ready? Are you ready? Are you ready for the imminent return of Christ and the ushering in of his eternal Kingdom? It will not be long. We don’t have to worry about when exactly. If you love and trust Christ, knowing the date of his return won’t change anything. You’re not following him because you’re afraid of him. You’re following him because you trust him. And if you trust him then you are eagerly ready for him whenever he comes. You are alert and watchful. Obedience becomes joyful. Justice is left ultimately in God’s hands. And suffering does not extinguish hope because we know suffering has its days numbered.

Here’s the best news. Did you notice what happens in Jesus’ example of the master and the faithful servants when the master returns and finds the servants ready for his arrival? Listen again to Jesus’ words: **“Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and**

have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.”

In the Ancient Middle East, servant and master roles were very well-defined. Specifically, no master would ever serve a feast to his slaves in this way. It’s why Jesus introduces this inconceivable idea with the phrase, **“Truly I tell you...”**⁸ In those days that would have been akin to saying, “You’re not going to believe this but I swear to you that what I’m about to tell you is true.” It is hard to believe. I’m not sure we could ever believe that this is how Jesus is going to behave when he returns if we had not seen him behave this way before. After all, this is the same Jesus who on the night before his death, even while he knew his friends were about to betray, deny and desert him, still got up from the table, girded his loins, and did the work of slave by washing their feet.⁹

Don’t get me wrong. When Christ returns he will return in glory and he will be worshipped by all of creation. Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that he is Lord. And yet the one returning is the same one who not only washes the feet of his servants but the one who gave everything, even his life, that we all might be brought back into right relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation, to a place where we might finally and forever enjoy the best of life that God has to offer.

400 years is a very long time. 2000 years is even longer. I know, at times, that the waiting can be hell. Let us nonetheless live as ready people – watchful, hopeful, joyful – prepared to meet Jesus when he comes, even today.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 12:35-48 again. There is a lot here. What immediately catches your attention? Why?
2. What danger(s) is Jesus warning us about in this passage?

⁸ This phrase is only used six times in Luke’s Gospel and every time it is used it is used to introduce something shocking or radical.

⁹ Read the account in John 13. See also Philippians 2:6-7.

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⁷ II Corinthians 4:17 (NRSV)

3. What would cause the slaves in Jesus' analogy to fail to be ready for the master's return? What does this teach us about similar dangers we face?
4. Jesus is clear that we must be ready for his return. Are we ready? Are you ready? How does a person know if he or she is ready?
5. If you believed that Jesus' return was imminent, how would you live differently today?
6. Jesus says in verse 48 that if you are given much, much will be required from you and if you have been entrusted much, much will be demanded. How much has been given to you? How much have you been entrusted with?
7. Jeff suggested four ways we can make ourselves a ready people. #1 - Be alert. #2 - Be joyfully obedient. #3 - Forgive freely and love radically (i.e. leave justice in God's hands). #4 - Hold on to hope in the midst of suffering. Which one of these reminders did you most need to hear? Why?
8. The Bible ends with this prayer in Revelation 22:20: **"Come, Lord Jesus!"** Is this your prayer? Do you long for Jesus to return as soon as possible? Why or why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What do we need to do to make sure we are ready to meet Jesus when he comes back some day?