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ARE YOU READY  
FOR CHRIST'S RETURN?

Luke 12:35-41

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Luke Lesson 61

## Are You Ready for Christ's Return? Luke 12:35-48

The summer after I graduated from seminary, I worked as a furniture mover in Dallas. I learned that many of the men I worked with had worked at this job for years, yet they had no job benefits—no sick leave, no paid vacation, no retirement, and no raises for seniority. The only benefit was that the job was strictly day labor, so they didn't have to show up for work if they didn't want to. If you wanted to work, you showed up at 7 a.m. and they sent out those who showed up.

Once in a while I noticed that one of the men wasn't at work. When I asked where he was, the other workers would laugh and say that he got paid and got drunk. As soon as he needed more money, he would be back at work.

I have since discovered that there is a common mindset shared by most of those who are perpetually poor, namely, that they rarely, if ever, think about the future. I call it a "welfare mentality." They only think about today. If they get some money, they don't think about the fact that rent will be due in two weeks or that other bills will be coming due. They only think about the fact that they've got money in their pocket *today*. Since they're "rich" today, they will treat all their buddies to a round of drinks. They'll gamble or spend it all in frivolous ways. But the one thing they will not do is save any money, because they don't think about the future.

Our Lord taught that we should not be anxious about tomorrow (Matt. 6:34), but He did *not* teach that we should ignore tomorrow! In fact, to the contrary, Jesus taught that our view of the future ought to be uppermost in our thinking about how we should live today. As followers of Jesus Christ, we should think often about the fact that He is coming soon and that every person must stand before Him to give an account. We should view ourselves as stewards who have been entrusted with time, money, and abilities, which we are to use for our Master's kingdom. At some time—we don't know when, but we do know that it is certain—our Lord will return and we must give an account to Him of how we used what

He gave us. After telling His disciples to seek for His kingdom, Jesus goes on to exhort them to be ready for His return, because when He comes, He will judge everyone.

We should be ready for the Lord's return, because when He comes He will judge everyone.

The text falls into two sections: the theme of 12:35-40 is readiness for His coming. The idea in 12:42-48 is that when the Lord comes, He will judge everyone according to what they have done with what they have been given.

1. Readiness: We should be ready for the Lord's return (12:35-40).

Jesus uses four word pictures to emphasize the same point: Be ready for His return. "Be dressed in readiness" is literally, "let your loins be girded." In that day, everyone wore long robes which were a hindrance if you needed to move quickly or freely. If a person planned to run or work, he would tuck his robe into a sash around his waist so that it would not interfere with his movements. The verb here indicates a state of perpetual readiness for action.

The second figure, "keep your lamps alight," comes from a day when there was no electricity. There were no streetlights or city lights outside and no nightlights to help you find your way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. If you were expecting a midnight visitor, you would keep an oil light burning so that when he knocked on the door, you could see to let him in. Again, the idea is, be ready for the Master's coming.

The third picture is of servants who are awaiting their master's return from a wedding feast. Such feasts could last for days, often for a week. The servants would need to be ready when they heard their master arrive to open the door and serve him. Scholars debate whether Luke is using a Roman or Jewish reckoning of the watches of the night, but the point is the same: the master could come in the middle of the night when you least expect him, so you must be ready.

The fourth picture is of a thief breaking into a house in the middle of the night. If the homeowner had known when the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. He would have been ready and waiting. Then Jesus states the

application of all four figures: "You, too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect" (12:40).

Scoffers may say, "It's been almost 2,000 years since Jesus spoke these words. Every generation since then has thought that it was the final generation before His coming, but they all died without seeing it happen. Face reality: It's just not going to happen!"

The apostle Peter points out (2 Pet. 3:3-13) that such foolish scoffers fail to note that God spoke the universe into existence by His powerful word and that He has given us an object lesson of the terror and power of His judgment in the flood. The present heavens and earth are being reserved, not for a judgment of water, but of fire. Also, with the Lord, a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. His view of time and ours are vastly different! The only reason He has delayed judgment is His great patience as He waits for more to come to repentance. Peter then uses Jesus' image of a thief:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God ..." (2 Pet. 3:10-12a).

An error regarding the Lord's coming called Preterism is gaining popularity in evangelical circles. The basic teaching is that the prophecies of Matthew 24 and the Book of Revelation were fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the Jewish people. There are various degrees of this teaching. The more mild Preterists would say that there will be a double fulfillment of some of these prophecies, and that Jesus Christ's bodily second coming is still future. While I disagree with many of their interpretations, this mild view is not heretical.

But the extreme Preterists argue that Christ actually came back in A.D. 70 and that He is not coming again! Although those who hold this view say that they are attempting to deal with the biblical texts, I believe that the extreme Preterists go outside the bounds of orthodoxy and are guilty of heresy. Their view robs

believers of the hope of the many promises of our Lord's coming. While it is true that we all will stand before Him the instant we die, the Bible clearly teaches that we should live every day in the hope that He may come at any time: "Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect!"

If you have any regard for Jesus' words, you must be concerned with the question, "*How can I be ready for His coming?*" Our text suggests three things:

(1) To be ready for Jesus' coming, He must be your Master.

There is a sense in which Jesus is the Lord of every person. In this passage, He clearly assumes the authority to be the rightful judge of everyone who has ever lived. But, also clearly, it will only go well for those who are rightly related to Him, who submit to Him as their personal Lord or Master. They will be blessed (12:37, 38, 43) when He comes; the rest will face His punishment.

Some will say, "Jesus is my Savior, but I haven't yet made Him my Lord." Really? Can you find a shred of biblical evidence that gives you comfort with such a condition? I will grant that a person can truly be saved and yet fall into sin. Every saint struggles daily against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and many saints have not learned to have consistent victory over these enemies of the soul. But I deny that you can be truly saved and live in sin and yet be comfortable living like that! If you claim to know Christ as Savior and yet you're shrugging off known sin as no big deal, you may be in for a serious reality check when Christ returns! The only people ready for His return are those who daily seek to bring every area of life under His lordship. It is a constant struggle, but if you are not engaging in the struggle, you need to examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Those who are ready for Christ's return seek to follow Him as Lord.

(2) To be ready for Jesus' coming, you must be His servant.

It should be obvious that a master is master of servants. His servants live to obey his commands and to do his bidding. Jesus here commends the servants who are up in the middle of the night, ready for their master's expected return. They were not up at that hour because they didn't like to sleep! They were up in the service of their master. Servants do not have a life of their own; they live

to please their master. It is only after they have done what he asked that he might say, "You are free to have some time to yourself." But even then, if he thinks of something else that he needs, he will call the servant and say, "I also need you to do such and such," and the servant must drop what he was doing or change his plans and respond, "Yes, master."

Being a servant of Jesus Christ is first and foremost a mindset and secondarily a specific ministry. My ministry is to be a pastor, but I only work at that task about 50 hours a week. But I am a servant of Jesus 24-7. Whether I'm shopping at WalMart or mowing my yard or spending time with my family, I should see myself as a servant of the Lord Jesus, obedient to His will. As Paul says, "You are not your own, for you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

In addition to a servant mindset, servants of Christ should seek out an area of service in line with their spiritual gifts. God has given all of us a function to perform in the body of Christ and that body will be healthy and grow to the degree that every member functions as he or she ought (Eph. 4:16). If you are not serving Christ in some capacity or looking for a place to serve, you are probably living for yourself. Servants seek to serve their Master. When He comes, He doesn't want to find them sitting on a hill waiting for His return. He wants to find them serving Him.

(3) To be ready for Jesus' coming, you must live in expectation of His return.

"Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert" (12:37). The homeowner should have been expecting the arrival of the thief. So, Jesus says, "You too, be ready" (12:40).

If you're expecting a guest, especially an important guest, you live differently than if you are not expecting anyone. On several occasions during President Carter's time in office, he spent the night in the homes of common people. It was his attempt to portray himself as the friend of the average person, a leader who understood the problems we all face. Although you might not want our current President to spend the night in your home, imagine how you would get ready if a normal President announced that he would be coming to spend the night. Your house would be spot-

less. All the beds would be made. You might even put a fresh coat of paint on some of the walls or woodwork. You would want your yard to look presentable. You might go to the nursery and buy some flowers to plant. You would want things to be clean and neat because you were expecting the President.

If you're expecting the King of kings, how should your life look? Would you have been comfortable if He had come back during your activities this past weekend? Are there books or magazines or videos that you need to get rid of before He comes to your home? Do you watch TV shows where you would be mortified if the Savior knocked on your door while they were on? Jesus says that we should be ready immediately to open the door to him when he comes and knocks (12:36). We shouldn't have to yell, "Just a minute," while we shut off the TV and hide a bunch of embarrassing stuff in the closet.

Spurgeon uses the analogy of his dogs to show how we should expectantly be awaiting our Master's return. He said that at the very moment he was speaking, his dogs were sitting inside his front door, awaiting his return. At the first sound of his carriage wheels, they would lift up their voices with delight because their master is coming home. Then he adds,

Oh, if we loved our Lord as dogs love their masters, how we should catch the first sound of his Coming, and be waiting, always waiting, and never happy until at last we should see him! Pardon me for using a dog as a picture of what you ought to be; but when you have attained to a state above that, I will find another illustration to explain my meaning (*12 Sermons on the Second Coming of Christ* [Baker], p. 141).

So to be ready for Christ's return, make sure that He is your Master; be involved in serving Him all day every day; and, live as if you expect His soon coming.

At this point, Peter asks whether the Lord is addressing this teaching to the twelve or to everyone else as well. Jesus' answer is indirect, but in effect He says that while the teaching applies especially to them (since they have been given much), it also applies to everyone in proportion to how much they have been given. Thus,

2. Reason for readiness: When the Lord returns, He will judge everyone in accordance with the light they have been given (12:41-48).

In answering Peter's question, Jesus lists four categories of servants, each of whom will receive a different reward or punishment. As in the parable of the soils, there is only one good category; the other three face punishment, beginning with the worst and moving toward the least severe. You can draw your own conclusions about whether the two categories who receive a whipping are believers who are disciplined or unbelievers who suffer in hell, but I wouldn't want to risk being in either of those categories in hopes that they will be saved! I want to be solidly in the first camp!

- (1) Some will be rewarded because they knew about the Master's coming and lived as faithful and sensible stewards (12:42-44).

The reason this parable especially applies to those in church leadership is that Jesus refers to the servants who have been put in charge of other servants to give them their rations at the proper time. The job of pastors is to feed the Lord's flock (Ezek. 34:2). In Ezekiel 34, the Lord upbraids the shepherds of Israel because they dominated His flock and used them for their own purposes, just as those in the second category here were doing. But the faithful and sensible steward who will receive a reward regards the needs of the servants in his charge and remembers that he will give an account to his master.

Three times (12:37, 38, 43) Jesus calls these faithful servants "blessed". He makes the startling statement that He, the Master, will wait on such servants (12:37)! He literally did that when He washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1-11). Here, Jesus is probably referring metaphorically to the honor that He will bestow on those who have faithfully served Him when He comes. He also states that He will put them in charge of all His possessions (12:44). This also is probably a metaphor of the rewards of heaven. We will not spend eternity sitting on a cloud. The Lord will give us meaningful responsibilities throughout eternity if we have faithfully served Him here on earth. While we cannot fathom the blessings that God has in store for His faithful servants, if Jesus three times calls them blessed, you know that they will truly be *blessed!*

- (2) Others will be punished very severely because they ignored the Master's coming and abused their stewardship (12:45-46).

This is the worst category of punishment. These slaves wrongly thought that they had plenty of time before their Master returned and so they began to live for themselves by abusing those under their charge. They used their stewardship for their own pleasure and advantage, without regard for the Master's purposes. But it is a fatal mistake. The Master will return and cut them in pieces (the word means "to dismember"). But, that isn't the end of these unfaithful servants, because then they are assigned a place with the unbelievers, namely, hell (12:5).

I believe that these frightening words especially apply to unfaithful spiritual leaders who have used their office for their own advantage. They usually teach false doctrine because they want to dodge their sin, which is exposed by God's Word. They use religion to promote their own greed and immorality. Jesus pronounces this most severe judgment on them because they have taken that which should have benefited people eternally and used it to destroy them. Their final punishment shows that they never truly repented of their own sins and submitted their lives to the Master.

But before you all say, "Whew, this doesn't apply to me," you need to realize that there is a secondary application to us all. If we know about the things of God, but we don't repent of our selfishness and abusiveness toward others, especially in our homes, are we not just like these unfaithful stewards? This especially applies to every husband and father who professes to be a Christian. If we do not repent of mistreating our wives and children, whom God has entrusted to our care, woe to us when the Master returns!

- (3) Others will be punished severely because they knew about the Master's coming, but did not get ready (12:47).

This category knew the Master's will, but they did not get ready or act in accord with His will. They will receive many lashes. This refers to people who have been in religious circles enough to know the truth, but they don't act on it. Maybe they procrastinate, thinking, "Someday I'll follow Christ and serve Him, but right now I've got to devote myself to my business. Besides, to get ahead

these days, you've got to cut a few corners, and so I'm not quite ready to follow Christ." Beware: To sin against greater light means greater punishment! To hear the truth proclaimed in church every Sunday and to go out and ignore that truth the rest of the week is a risky way to live. What if the Master comes this week?

- (4) Others will be punished less severely because they did not know about the Master's coming or live in light of it (12:48a).

The final category for judgment are those who did not even know the Master's will. They will be judged less severely, with a few lashes, but judged nonetheless. Ignorance of God's law is no excuse for not obeying it because we are responsible to know it. As J. C. Ryle points out, "Our very ignorance is part of our sin" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], p. 94). Even those who have never heard of Christ have enough revelation through creation and conscience to know that there is a righteous God. But they have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness, so that they are without excuse (Rom. 1:18-20).

### Conclusion

Jesus sums up the principle in 12:48: "And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." Those who have been given the most light have the most responsibility and will be judged the most severely. There will be gradations of punishment in hell. Jesus clearly assumes His own authority to judge every person!

Each person needs to answer the question, "Do I have a 'welfare mentality' regarding spiritual things?" Are you living for today only, with no regard for the Master's return and the accounting that He will demand? Are you foolishly putting it out of your mind by thinking, "I've got time"? Jesus says that we should be "like men who are waiting for their master when he returns." We should live each day with an eye on that future day when "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). We will be blessed if the Master finds us ready when He comes.

## Discussion Questions

1. Should we give assurance of salvation to a person who says, "Jesus is my Savior, but not my Lord"? Defend biblically.
2. How would you counsel a young person who said that he did not want to spend years preparing for Christian service because he thought that the Lord would return soon?
3. How can a Christian discover his or her spiritual gift? Should every Christian be involved in ministry? Cite Scripture.
4. Should believers fear God's judgment in any sense? If so, how so? Cite Scripture.

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