

# Luke 12:35-48

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray as we sit. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. Amen. Well, tonight's Bible reading has a pretty simple message in one sense.

It's be ready. And I'm going to think about what that means in a little while. But first I'm going to start by just enjoying the pictures that Jesus paints for us.

There's three of them, although the first one is divided up into some sub-pictures. And the first two pictures go together.

And then there's a third one that's slightly less closely connected. And the first story is all about a master going to a wedding. Now, weddings were pretty long events in those days.

[ 1 : 12 ] I think perhaps even longer than they are now. And the master might come back any time. He could come back any time in the night. And the servant had to wait up and be ready for him.

Now, literally, and I chose to do them all literally for my first four points so I could get L out of each, was that the servant has to have his loins girded.

Now, I couldn't discover exactly what that means. But I think the picture is something like this. If you wear a long robe, then it's difficult to run in it.

If you want to move quickly, you have to... First you have to... I think girding is about tying the belt up. And then you tuck your robe in. I tried an experiment this morning at 9 o'clock with my cassock.

I didn't want to... I thought perhaps if I just have it completely flapping, I would trip over and this would be a disaster. Fortunately, I didn't trip over. So I didn't do the experiment to its fullness. But I did then try tucking it in and I could rush much better.

[ 2 : 21 ] So I did an actual experiment this morning. You'll be glad to know. I girded my loins and I was ready to move at much greater speed just as the servant in the story is meant to be, meant to do.

And the servant could have to wait a long time before he was able to... before his service was actually required. The wedding could finish at any time in the night.

It talks about the second or third watch. Perhaps the least useful part of this sermon is the discussion of how many watches there are in a night. The Romans had four. I think we're fairly clear on that.

So the third watch is between 12 and 3, if it is March, say. It's possible that the Jews had three watches. So that actually the last watch would take you right up to 6 in the morning.

There's reference to a middle watch in Judges 7. You'll be glad we'll get to that in due course. So the servant could have to wait a very long time to go into action.

[ 3 : 23 ] But the point is he's got to be ready and he has to have his loins girded. And that's a phrase actually that takes us back into the Old Testament.

It takes us back into Exodus chapter 12 because the Jews were told that they had to have their loins girded so that as soon as the angel of death had gone through and as soon as they were able to set up...

At that very moment, they'd be able to set off for the promised land. As soon as it was time, they had to be ready to go. And the message to us is that we have to be ready for Jesus.

Ready for when he comes. And there are two pictures there. There's both the pictures of the loins girded and lamps lit. Now that's really easy for us.

I think we have to try and get back into a different world. I mean, you know, you have your light switch and it goes on and off and it's all really easy, isn't it? But when I first used to do Scripture

Union Camp, we used to have lamps.

[ 4 : 35 ] And we used to have them in our tent. In fact, the most important job you could have, other than being the commie, the overall chap, was to be lamp officer. Because lamp officer spent quite a part of the day making sure the lamps were full of oil and making sure the wicks worked properly.

I know, Nula, this is before you did camp with us. But this is 30 years ago we used to have a lamp officer. And this was a really important job.

Because in the evening we had to be able to see and do our Bible study in our tent without getting distracted or enormous columns of smoke coming out of the lamp or some other disaster.

Well, the point then was that the servant had to have his lamp all ready so that when the master comes and calls, he's off, loins girt, lamp in hand, and ready for the master.

I think we find these pictures sort of take us back into a rather foreign world. But I think for Jesus here, these were very familiar pictures. But actually, the next bit of the story must have been a real surprise for them.

[ 5 : 51 ] Because it says that, Jesus says that for the person, the servant who's ready, loins girt, lamp in hand, then the master doesn't just, perhaps you might hope for a thank you or something in the middle of the night that he stayed up.

It says no. He girds his loins and then he makes them recline at table and comes and waits on them.

Isn't that an exciting picture? If we're ready for Jesus, he serves us. Isn't that an astonishing picture of humility and of kindness?

That's perhaps the thing that when I read this passage that struck me, I thought I knew the passage fairly well, but that had never struck me before. That's perhaps the most exciting thing that struck me.

It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. He says, verse 37. Verse 38, it will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak.

[ 7 : 07 ] That's how it translates the bit about the watches. But the second picture is rather different and makes a point that goes with the first point, but it's not quite the same.

The first point is that we have to be ready for the expected coming of Jesus. We know he's coming and we have to be ready for that.

But the second picture says that although we expect the coming of Jesus, its actual timing is unexpected. This is the picture where it says, 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.

The householder has to be ready. I've had to call him a larcenist. That's someone who commits larceny. You could perhaps call him a looter if you prefer to get another L. But I've gone for larcenist, which I think is probably more accurate.

The owner of the house has to be ready for the looter. I don't quite know how he has to be ready. We're not told. You could picture that he's got the lights on, well, the lamp on.

[ 8 : 23 ] That might discourage the larcenist altogether. Or it could be that he's standing behind a door clutching his frying pan, which is a rather more dangerous way, an exciting way of being ready.

Either way, he's ready for the larcenist to come. Jesus' coming is both expected, we know that the master will come back from the wedding in due course, but its timing is unexpected.

We don't know when a thief might break in. And then there's this third picture. We've got the, as I say, the servant waiting for the master returning from the wedding.

We've got the householder waiting being ready for the thief. And then we've got this third picture.

And this is a picture of a master who's gone away and he's left a manager, a sort of senior servant, in charge when he goes away.

And the servant's particular charge, it seems, is to make sure that the servants get their food allowance at the proper time. So I've called that lunch served, being a particularly important opportunity for carrying out his job.

[ 9 : 45 ] And this servant doesn't have to watch out, doesn't stand on a tower and look out to see if he can see the master coming. In fact, if he did that, he'd never get anywhere with his actual job.

His actual job is to get on with providing the food for the other servants. And the crucial question is how the servant behaves in the event of a delay.

Because there is a delay. Verse 45, Suppose the servant says to himself, My master is taking a long time in coming. And then he behaves badly.

So there's no doubt that the point is about a coming that is delayed. How will we as servants respond to that?

Now, if we get on with our jobs, the thing that Jesus has given us to do, then, when Jesus comes, the master finds us doing the job that he's given us, and truly, I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

[ 11 : 02 ] It's promotion for the servant. The manager becomes even more important than he was before. But if he forgets the coming master, then there seem to be three sorts of failure.

The most serious is the one where he's actually abusive. He begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. And if the servant behaves like that, the master will turn up on a day when he's not expected and cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

But if the servant is not actually an abuser, but he doesn't actually get on with the master's service, even though he knows what he's supposed to be doing, he'll be beaten with many blows, it says. And there's a third category of one who does not know but still fails, who are beaten with few blows. So these are very challenging words. And there are challenges, I think, as we read them for both the unbeliever and the believer. Let's think about the unbeliever first.

[ 12 : 25 ] I think for the unbeliever, it's the first two stories that speak most clearly. The first two stories are directed to both believers and unbelievers.

And the message is simple. Jesus says, I'm coming, will you be ready? The Jews were expecting God's coming.

They were expecting a visible, powerful coming. They were surprised that the first coming, although it had some of the features of visible, powerfulness, we might think of the blind receiving their sight, of the deaf, hearing, lepers, cleansed, lame, walking, dead, raised.

Those were features that were part of the, expected as part of the powerful coming. that first coming ultimately reached its climax on Calvary. So the Jews understood Jesus talking about the coming, but there's more to come.

Jesus is going to, we talk about the second coming, although 2 Peter just calls it the coming. We look forward to Jesus returning. And it's both as sure as the master returning from a wedding and as uncertain in its timing as a burglary.

[ 14 : 05 ] And the challenge is to be ready. Because the passage says if you're not ready, it'll be too late. If you're not ready, then you get burgled.

If you're not ready, the master turns up and you don't greet him because you're asleep. It's even more clear in the story of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25 that there comes a time when not having the oil in your lamp means you're shut out.

We're quite used to that thought, I think, in other areas. You can't get ready for an exam on the day of the exam itself. My great-grandfather was an engineer working for the Great Western Railway. And he'd observed that the most exciting jobs went to those who were ready to go at once. He accordingly had a bag of clothes in the office. And his colleagues mocked him.

And so they tied his bag of clothes up to the roof onto a hook and left it there. And one day one of the directors came in and asked what the bag was.

[ 15 : 26 ] And they said, well, it's Harris's black bag. And the director said, well, you know, why does he have a black bag? And they said, well, it's so that he's ready to go anywhere, anytime.

And some little time later, someone was needed to go out to Bolivia as chief engineer to build a railway for the Bolivian government. And Harris was the one to go.

I think he was only 23. Readiness meant a call to hire service. There I'm thinking of the Bolivian mountains.

But one could think of it better than that. When it comes to the most important things in life, the same is true. It's told of Mary of Orange that when she was dying, her chaplain came to speak to her about the things of eternity.

My friend, she answered gently, I did not leave this matter till this hour. I did not leave this matter till this hour.

[ 16 : 37 ] The challenge to anyone who doesn't yet believe in Jesus is to put my trust, our trust, in him now to receive the forgiveness that he offers through his death on the cross, in our place and

for our sake.

And if you haven't responded and would like to, have a word with Martin or me or Gordon or almost any of us and talk about becoming ready for Jesus' return.

But in many ways this passage speaks most clearly to the believer. when Peter asks, Lord, are you telling this parable to us or to everyone?

No answer. It's not totally clear what we're supposed to make of that. But I think the second, the last story is I think told particularly to believers and the first one is for believers and unbelievers.

That's the way I'm taking it. The first part of the story, the story about the servant who's waiting for the master to come back to the wedding banquet or for the one.

[17:57] That sort of readiness is about focus. It's about making my priority being ready for Jesus. Having my eye on him and his coming and his will.

And as I thought about that, I think that the main alternative to sitting, focused, loins girt, all things we're talking about before, is being asleep.

That's really what is the unsatisfactory alternative. And I'm going to read a few verses from Romans 13. You don't need to look them up. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. being awake, ready to go, is about a godly life, avoiding jealousy, dissension, sexual immorality.

[19:24] But perhaps the best way of looking at it would be to take account of the verses that precede the ones we're talking about tonight.

In which case, the particular danger that we have to avoid if we're going to keep our focus on Jesus and his return, the particular danger is the love of money, laying up treasures here rather than sending it on ahead.

But I think one thing that the passage really helps me to want to do tonight is to look forward to Christ's return.

As I said, it's extraordinary that if we are ready, he serves us. You know how children are perhaps, I'm guessing, five or ten or something like that.

You know what they're like on Christmas Eve. They don't know exactly what the next day is going to be like but they know it's going to be wonderful and they're looking forward intently to it.

[20:31] They have that focus on the next day and they have that focus particularly on their parents and the gifts they hope to get. I think that's not a terribly poor picture of what we might be doing thinking about Jesus and about his return focused on it.

I don't know whether you have a favorite hymn or a favorite thing that helps you to do that. I mean, I don't know whether Bernard of Cluny's words are helpful to you. Jerusalem the golden with milk and honey blessed beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice oppressed.

I know not, oh I know not what social joys are there, what radiancy of glory, what light beyond compare. There is the throne of David and there from care released the song of them that triumph, the shout of them that feast and they who with their leader have conquered in the fight forever and forever are clad in robes of white.

There are lots of different pictures we might need, might use. But we think about Jesus and we look forward to his coming and we focus on it. But the second passage is perhaps the easier one in terms of our getting ready for Jesus.

the last of the stories, it's less about focus than about activity. The servant is simply called to do what God calls him to.

[22:10] To give them their food allowance at the proper time. Now it's a parable and we shouldn't necessarily treat it as an allegory and work it all out too much.

But I don't think it's wrong to see that food, distributing food as being one option. It could be spiritual food, giving people the Bible, expounding it to them.

Preachers always tend to see it like that. But I don't think that's wrong. And I think it's also something that if you're leading a home group or teaching in Powerhouse or whatever it is, what you're doing is giving people their food at the proper time.

or if your ministry is actual food, physical food. It could be people who produced a lovely lunch for us, for those who are for newcomers this morning or for the international students on a Thursday or whatever it is.

If that's your ministry, well get on and do it. You don't spend your time standing on a tower sort of looking to see if Jesus is coming. most of the time you spend getting on with the work that you've actually been given to do.

[ 23 : 27 ] And it's hard work. It's hard work expounding Scripture and understanding it.

Understanding and expounding it. Put it the other way around. It's hard work preparing meals for lots of people.

It's hard work whatever we've been given and you have to keep doing it over a long period of time. because in one sense Jesus is delayed.

People were expecting him sooner. But he hasn't come yet and our task is to carry on. To take up our cross daily.

To set our hand to the plow and not look back. To keep going. Serving him. And I had a little thought as I read the passage that I hadn't seen before.

And it was this. From Psalm 145 there's a phrase that goes like this. The eyes of all look to you O God and you give them their food in due season.

[ 24 : 35 ] That's what God does for us. He gives us our food in due season. And it's interesting that the manager's task is to give them their food allowance at the proper time.

It's rather similar isn't it? It's not exactly the same words. But the manager's task is in that sense his godliness is following God as God does something.

So he's called to do that too. That's what we're doing for people. Following God. Being godly.

Being like him. Being like him. And the worst of the servants the most abusive of the servants is the one who actually takes the food that should have gone to each of the other servants and keeps it all for himself.

He begins to beat the other servants and to eat and drink and get drunk. Now surely he was allowed to eat and drink himself. That suggests he should be fasting. But he's not to take everyone else's portion.

[ 25 : 39 ] He has to share it out. And again if we're faithful then the reward is great.

Put in charge of all his possessions. Some people think quite wrongly that heaven will be boring.

Maybe Bernard of Cuny's picture I read earlier didn't sound very exciting.

But actually whatever this increased responsibility is we don't exactly know. But there's something he's going on from one job to higher service. There's something more special whatever that involves we don't know.

It's a bit like waiting for Christmas. When you're a child we don't know exactly what it's going to be like but we know it's going to be wonderful. But there's a lot of emphasis here on the disobedient. In all that time on the time of waiting when Jesus is in one sense absent here by his spirit yes but not physically present until he returns in glory.

[ 26 : 49 ] There are servants who fail him. Abusers worst of all but also ones who don't actually beat the other servants but ones who still fail to do what they're called to do.

And I don't know that any of us will be in the category who doesn't know. We've all been given lots of copies of the Bible in many translations and much help.

But I don't want to end there. I want to end with some words of St. Peter which he wrote much later in his life. And he says this in 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 2.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care watching over them not because you must but because you are willing as God wants you to be not pursuing dishonest gain but eager to serve not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock and when the chief shepherd appears you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father we want to be ready whether Jesus comes tonight tomorrow or in a hundred years.

[ 28 : 35 ] We want to go on faithfully serving you. We realize that two of these passages we think of ourselves particularly as servants or managers help us to be focused on you and focused on the task that you've given us.

Help us to do it well so that when you come back we may receive the crown of glory for we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen.