

Ready, Set, Go!

Luke 12: 35-40

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

This summer we will be sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening, like fascinated children, to the best-ever stories of the Master storyteller. We're beginning a summer series on the Parables. Jesus told each story to nourish hungry hearts and give living water to the thirsty souls of every "person who has a heart to know God, to love God, and to be known and loved by God." In today's parable, Jesus exhorts us to be ready for His return!

What does it mean to be dressed ready for action and keep your lamps burning? What does it mean to be ready for service, as the NIV translates this? Though school has been out only a week or two, in August, parents of school children will be saying early in the morning, "Time to get up and get dressed." Implicit in this is "get ready for school, set to learn, be prepared to go!" In biblical times, getting dressed was to gird yourself, as ancient warriors girded up their loins to prepare for battle. Men would put on a belt of leather with several strips of leather hanging down, forming an "apron" to protect the lower torso i.e. girding one's loins. Into this belt, a man's tunic or robe would be tucked and sword's scabbard placed. Every Roman soldier wore a tunic - a large square cloth, with holes for head and arms. All Jewish men wore long robes of loose cloth. When going into battle or just to do everyday work, it was dangerous to have a robe or tunic flapping around, and limiting mobility, and so girding your loins, being dressed for action with that belt was the first sign of preparedness for battle or for work. You may remember the image of an extravagant father of the lost younger son gathering up his robes, tucking them into his belt enabling him to run and welcome his son who had been lost and now was found. He was dressed, ready for action.

We may feel like we go into different kinds of battles. When the Apostle Peter wrote to "gird your minds,"¹ it has more applicability when we understand it to mean, "Prepare your minds for action". The New Living Translation says, "So think clearly." This picks up verse 37 in our Luke text, "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes;" Being awake, alert, and ready is very important.

¹ Peter. 1:13

Another way Jesus describes being ready is to have your lamps lit, and keep them burning! The Middle Eastern lamp was a wick floating in a sauceboat of oil. Always, the wick had to be kept trimmed and the lamp supplied with oil, or the light would go out. From these lamps, we get our expression, “burning your candle at both ends.” If you burned your wick at both ends to double the brightness, you’d lose your wick and oil twice as fast burning one end.

Jesus is saying, as He does elsewhere “We are to be ready to welcome the Bridegroom in the night with lamps lit, to be watchful and prepared. That is the story of ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of the bridesmaids were foolish, and five were wise. The five who were foolish took no oil for their lamps, but the other five were wise enough to take along extra oil. When the bridegroom was delayed, they all lay down and slept. (See, they did not stay alert!) At midnight they were roused by the shout, ‘Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and welcome him!’ All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. Then the five foolish ones asked the others, ‘Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.’ But the others replied, ‘We don’t have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.’ But while they were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was locked. Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, ‘Sir, open the door for us!’ But he called back, ‘I don’t know you!’ So stay awake and be prepared, because you do not know the day or hour of my return.”² Even in the dark hour of the night, we must be ready and alert.

The setting of our passage is around the time of a wedding the Master of the household is attending. There were two important steps to a Jewish marriage: the betrothal (the promised agreement to marry) and the actual wedding ceremony. These two events were often separated by an extended period of time during which the couple remained faithful to one another though the wedding ceremony was not yet finalized. Remember Mary was betrothed to Joseph when the angel informs her that she is to bear Jesus. Our betrothal to Christ takes place when we say, “Yes,” to Jesus Christ. But the wedding ceremony occurs when Christ, the Bridegroom, comes to take us as His bride. We’re in the in-between time, so get ready!

I love this saying: “Live as though Jesus died yesterday, rose today and is coming back tomorrow!”³ Wouldn’t we live more grateful lives? Wouldn’t we worship with more

² Matthew 25:1-13

³ Epp, Theodore H. Author of many books on Christianity

joy and passion? Wouldn't we be ready? Or would we? But ready for what? Just for Christ's return at the end of time?

For action verse 36 says, "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."⁴ Wedding banquets could go on for a week, so it was not clear when the Master would return, but surely He would, and His servants were to be up and ready to receive Him.

Growing up in Connecticut, I learned about Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives. One day in 1789, the sky of Hartford, Connecticut, the state capital, darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end of the world was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." He was ready to serve and literally keep his candles lit. Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful until Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to keep our lights lit as we watch and are dressed, ready for work while we wait.

What is the work, the service, the action to which God calls you? When there is talk of the "END" as there was at the turn of the century, and after 9/11, often there is confusion. This happened even in the time of the New Testament. The Apostle Paul had to deal with people becoming irresponsible with family and work, because people literally were standing on hilltops looking for the bodily return of Jesus Christ. When Jesus said watch, that's not what he meant.

A mature Christian is one who will take the words, "Watch" and "Prepare" (or "Get Ready") as pointers for life, not words which point to a day or time. As one person said last Monday at San Marino Community Church, "The Kingdom of God is not in the clouds. It's here, in Conversational English, in our Malawi partnerships, in serving at Union Station on the second Sunday night each month, in Children's and Student Ministries, in our Grief Support Groups, and I'm working for it!"

In addition to being prepared to act and to serve, we are to be ready for crisis. When Jesus told this parable to the people, He knew the impending crisis was his crucifixion

⁴ Luke 12:37

and what would seem to the end of all he had preached and taught and healed and modeled to his followers. There would be little hope for his disciples, so they'd scatter and hide out, fearing for their own lives, too.

It reminds me of what happened in Pompeii in 79 A.D. Years ago, a May 1984 issue of National Geographic illustrated through color photos and drawings the swift and terrible destruction that wiped out the Roman Cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden; the residents were killed while in their routine: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, and slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate. It takes little imagination to picture the panic of that terrible day.

The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists have confirmed what ancient Roman writers recorded--weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. Even an ominous plume of smoke was clearly visible from the mountain days before the eruption. If only they had been able to understand and respond to Vesuvius' warning! There are similar "rumblings" in our world: warfare, earthquakes, the nuclear threat, economic woes, breakdown of the family and moral standards. While not exactly new, these things do point to a coming Day of Judgment (Matthew 24). People need not be caught unprepared. God warns and provides an escape to those who will heed the rumblings.

The cataclysm of Christ's return will come in God's timing, but we are to be ready, be at work, and be about our Father's business, as 12 yr. old Jesus told his parents in the Jerusalem temple. Knowing we are God's beloved frees us from fear and enables us to serve with joy and love. After Jesus' resurrection and the promises He made as He ascended, His disciples knew they needed to wait for God's power, the Holy Spirit, so they would be able to work. And the Holy Spirit was poured out on all believers at Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' death, a few days after he ascended. We know that if we have opened our lives to Jesus Christ, we have received the Holy Spirit, though we can always open more of our lives to be even more filled and empowered for action, for service, for the work to which God calls us, where we spend our time, as well as in and thru the Church.

We are to be ready for the return of our Master which will signal the beginning of the end of this world as we know it. How will we know this is happening? What will the media say? Sports Illustrated: “Game’s Over!” Family Circle: “Lose 10 Pounds by Judgment Day with Our New Armageddon Diet!” Wall Street Journal: “Ten Ways You Can Profit from the Apocalypse.” CNN: “World Ends; Women and Children Most Affected.” Nordstrom Catalog: “Our Final Sale.” AOL, Yahoo, Gmail: “System Temporarily Down. Try again in 15 Minutes.” Seriously though, beloved Presbyterian. Professor and theologian Dale Bruner, who lives at Monte Vista Groves, wrote this story about David Peterson, pastor of Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church in Houston, TX. He told about a time when he was preparing his sermon. His little daughter came in and asked, “Daddy, can we play?” He answered, “I’m awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I’m right in the middle of preparing this sermon. In about an hour I can play.” She said, “Okay, when you’re finished, Daddy, I am going to give you a great big hug.” He said, “Thank you very much.” She went to the door and (these are his words) “Then she did a U-turn and came back and gave me chiropractic, bone-breaking hug.” David said to her, “Darling, you said you were going to give me a hug after I finished.” She answered, “Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!”⁵

God wants us to know, through Christ’s First Coming, how much we have to look forward to in his great Second Coming. Today’s parable reminds us that Jesus’ death was not the end, nor was His resurrection or even His ascension. He will return! Jesus also says in verse 39 that we’re also to be ready for the potential thief, an attack of an adversary. Jesus describes protecting a mud and brick home, which could be dug through. It may have been built on a rock, but these building materials were not impervious to robbery. As a householder, you need to be prepared because you never know when a thief might come. It’s not going to be easy or obvious nor will you know when.

Australian theologian Leon Morris wrote, “Jesus’ followers must always be ready to face the crises of life in the spirit of true discipleship.”⁶ We cannot make our lives, our homes, our bodies perfectly secure, even with retirement savings, alarm systems, healthy eating, exercise, and vitamins. But we need to do our best, do our work to be ready. But how? How do we get ready and keep our lamps lit and burning? In other words, how do we fulfill our church’s mission statement in our own lives? That is, how do we live Jesus’ great commandment to love God with your heart (emotions/passion), soul (your human spirit), your mind (your intellect) and strength (your body),

⁵ Bruner, Dale “*Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?*” Theology, News, and Notes (October 1999), p. 3

⁶ Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975. p. 216

and your neighbor as yourself? ⁷ It's a high goal – the highest and best and a tall order, but impossible without the power of the Holy Spirit!

Fan the flames of your faith, your relationship with God but with what goal in mind? “Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ⁸ We are to be like Him when we see Him face to face, as students used to say, that is face to face. How do we become like Christ? How do we fix our hope, set all our hope on the grace Jesus Christ's return will bring? How do we get prepared? Here at San Marino Community Church, we talk with our new members about “Worship + 2”. Worship can be defined as glorifying or adoring/honoring God and enjoying the Triune God – that is being in relationship with God the Creator, with Jesus Christ the Savior of the world and Lord of all (whether they know it or not), and the Holy Spirit, God's presence and power, the comforter and counselor. We're to: worship weekly together on Sunday, celebrating Christ's resurrection and worship personally in quiet time daily, regularly. This is a daily decision that becomes a daily habit. When we ‘gird up our minds,’ as Peter writes, that means to discipline you or to ‘be self-controlled’.⁹

This daily worship, which is a struggle, blessing of praise and prayer, reading scripture, so we all have some cud to chew on and let it shape us, form us, conform us, transform us to be more like Jesus in our unique skin, more the person God created us to be. For me, not your most self-disciplined person, I like to sing and worship as I drive – you've likely seen me, but as one of my favorite songs says, “God inhabits our praise, so I am uplifted and empowered.” If I do not read scripture before I come to into my office (interesting that a pastor's office used to be called a study, eh?) it pops up when I boot up my computer. Scripture from the Daily Lectionary, morning and evening psalms, another Old Testament text, and a reading from a Gospel and an Epistle. Also other readings and options are available, like paintedprayerbook.com, sacredspace.ie, and d365daily reminder and to help with outward thrust, our denomination's Mission Yearbook is online. So what is WORSHIP! + 2?

#1. Get into a discipleship nurturing group – a small group, a Sunday class, Tuesday or Friday Bible study - a group of people who know and love you, the real you and with whom you are accountable for the spiritual goals you have. This is the best way

⁷ Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:27

⁸ Peter 1:13c

⁹ Peter 1:13b

to grow in faith and to experience God's care. A couple of years ago, a significant number of people began in "purpose-driven" groups, many of which are still going and growing. In the fall, there will be a new opportunity to be blest through shared study, personal sharing, and prayer support for anyone who would like to take this adventure. And of course, there are always adult classes and Bible studies.

#2. Be a servant, a minister, act out, live your love for your neighbor as yourself. In some churches I've served, the bulletin lists the staff, but for ministers, it says the congregation. That is the biblical model. Pastors and staff are not called to do the ministry, but to equip the saints – that's YOU – to do the ministry,¹⁰ especially where you spend the majority of your time. You may be the only Christ your neighbors, your work colleagues ever see. Recently, someone found it helpful to think of representing Christ, as former Seminary Professor, Ben Campbell Johnson says.

A minister is servant and we're all to be serving...Are you using your life skills, your spiritual gifts with your unique style and personality? Do you know what these are – your spiritual gifts, your personality type, your style? Watch for an opportunity to discern and discover these in community in the near future. And read and get to know the needs the congregation is trying to address, and listen to your life and your neighbors' lives to discern the needs, and please pray about how to minister to them and help meet their needs. God may lead you to invite a team to serve in this new way!

What's the benefit? The reward? "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." Only in the Kingdom of God does this happen! Just like when Jesus washed his disciples' feet! When I perform a wedding, as I did here yesterday, at the time of the marriage prayer, I tell the guests that I am wrapping the couple's hands in my white stole. A pastor's stole is a symbol of the towel Jesus wore and used when he washed his followers' feet – an apt symbol for the mutual serving in marriage.¹¹ Look forward to the special blessings that will come to you at the return of Jesus Christ.¹²

In his recent book, Phil Yancey says, "I do not get to know God, then do God's will; I get to know God by doing God's will. I enter into an active relationship, which means spending time with God, caring about people God cares about and following God's

¹⁰ Ephesians 4

¹¹ Luke 12: 37

¹² 1 Peter 1:13c

commands—whether I spontaneously feel like it or not. We do not first see, then act; we act, then see. And that is why the person who waits to see clearly, before acting, never starts the journey.”¹³ So let us start the journey, running to Jesus Christ, and continue the journey, walking with Him in daily and weekly worship + 2, getting ready for his return with a small group of other disciples and showing our love of Him and others as servants. Truly, you will be ready, and set to go!

Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

¹³ Yancy, Phil and Quinn, Brenda, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Zondervan Publishing, 2001,