

Looking Forward

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read scripture for us, the passage that David's very shortly going to come and speak to us from. This is Luke chapter 12, verses 35 to 48.

If you've got a church Bible, it's on page 871. If you've not got a church Bible and you'd like one, they're just on the table at the back there. The words are also in the bulletin if you've got one, and they'll be on screen.

This is God's word. It says, 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.

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 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. Truly I say to you, he will set them 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 into eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and an hour when he does not know.

[1 : 45] And he 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, of much will be required.

And from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. Amen. This is God's word. We come this evening to our final sermon on our evening series, The Call to Discipleship, looking through Luke chapter 9 through 12.

And so if you have a Bible, please turn to Luke 12 and verse 35 into that passage that Chris read for us. The story is told of the famous 19th century scientist, agnostic, Thomas Huxley.

He was visiting Ireland for some speaking engagements, and on one occasion he was leaving his Dublin hotel in a hurry to catch a cab to the train station in order to get to a meeting in the north of Ireland.

[3 : 07] And he assumed that the doorman at the hotel had told the cab driver where he was to go. And so he rushed out of the hotel, he jumped into the carriage, and he shouted to the driver to hurry up and to get there as fast as he could.

A few minutes later, he looked out of the window of his carriage to realize that it was moving at breakneck speed through the city streets in the direct opposite direction from the railway station. And so he asked the driver, he shouted to the driver if he knew where he was going, to which the man replied, No, sir, but I'm going there as fast as I can.

And there's a sense in which that story is a kind of parable of our cultural moments. We have no idea where we're going, but we are going there as fast as we can.

Scientific technological progress continues apace, but there is often absolutely no direction to it.

[4 : 20] In many respects, we live in a society that has lost hope in the future. A recent survey of young people published, I think maybe a year or two ago, highlighted that anxiety about the future was a major issue for youngsters.

As Woody Allen once quipped, the future isn't what it used to be. The dreams, the dreams, the visions, the hopes of the past have failed.

No aim, no goal, no vision, no reference point to guide us. Nothing from which to set our compass. I suspect this may account for the impatience of our modern culture, which must have everything

now.

We don't want to defer anything to the future. We don't want to save for anything. We want to buy it now. And that's why so many people today think that life does consist in the abundance of one's possessions.

Why? Because there appears no alternative vision to the materialistic, secular gods of our age. And the result is a society which, despite all its material wealth, is often characterized by disillusionment, despair, apathy, anxiety, insecurity, cynicism.

[5 : 53] A lack of vision for the future tears the guts out of any culture. Very soon people have nothing to work for, nothing to save for, nothing to live for.

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die. That is, this is the philosophy of our age. And that motto for the rich fool who we met in the earlier verses of this chapter.

Get it all now because there's nothing else to live for. And in this section of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been addressing just this kind of outlook on life.

He's been challenging the kind of lifestyle that exists just for the here and now and doesn't factor in what lies ahead. He wants His followers, His disciples, to be a people who live with the future in mind.

He wants us to be a people storing up for ourselves treasure in heaven, not on earth. He wants us to live lives full of hope. He wants us to orientate our lives towards the future.

[7 : 10] And in these verses before us tonight, Jesus continues with this theme. And frequently in the gospels, as He does here, Jesus speaks of His return.

You'll notice in verse 40, He talks about being ready for the Son of Man. That's a title that Jesus often uses of Himself in the gospels, taken from Daniel 7.

It's coming at an hour you do not expect. It's important for us to understand, I think, that the second coming of Jesus Christ is not a kind of optional extra for the Christian faith.

It is integral to the Bible's storyline and foundational, really, to Christian doctrine. It's a kind of teaching that has grown out of fashion in the modern age, and one that people are sometimes a little embarrassed about.

But friends, it's not without reason that this teaching is included in all the major creeds and confessions of the Christian church.

[8 : 27] Because from the very beginning, Christians have universally held the conviction that Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly to end history, to judge the world, to bring salvation to His people.

We might remember Jesus' words on the eve of His crucifixion in John 14. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, that where I am, you may be also. And when Jesus ascended into heaven, we read of the disciples, Acts chapter 1, While they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven. In other words, the King will come to... will return to claim His kingdom.

And so, in the light of His return, what does Jesus look for and expect in His disciples? In a world that is so often materialistic to its core, how are we to live as His disciples?

[9 : 49] In a world dominated by the here and now, how are we to conduct ourselves? What is Jesus telling us here? He's telling us that the end point and the judgment to come is to control the way we think about life in the here and now.

And these verses really contain in the main two parables designed to make us think about that future reality.

The reckoning that will inevitably result. And I want to split the passage really into two sections here.

The first part of the passage, the first parable really, is all about readiness, being ready. Jesus wants us to be ready for His coming.

And we have that in verses 35 through 40. He doesn't want His followers to be unprepared for what will one day take place.

[10 : 53] And He illustrates with the picture of servants in a household waiting for their master to return from a wedding feast. Verse 35, stay dressed for action, keep your lamps burning.

Literally, gird up your loins and keep your lamps burning. In ancient times, servants would often wear these long flowing robes. Sometimes these robes would impair movement and quick action. And so, they had to be girded up and tucked into the belt. So, that swift and ready action could be taken. Not only that, says Jesus, but the lights are to be left on.

The servants are not to be floundering around in the darkness. Instead, they're to be in the light and they're to be ready for the master the instant He arrives.

Verse 35, 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. The wedding feast in ancient times, perhaps even today, could last some considerable time.

[12:04] No one actually quite knew when it might end, finish. The celebrations could go on and on and on. And the servants in the house would not know exactly when their master would return.

Nonetheless, they are to be prepared and ready for that eventuality. Jesus doesn't want His followers asleep in the dark, in the wrong clothing.

He wants them to be ready for action, ready to respond when He returns. I don't know if you've ever had to get up suddenly in the middle of the night, but sometimes that can be quite a disorientating experience.

I remember some years ago at a conference in Creef Hydro, and I was woken up by a ringing sound. And I spend, I seem to spend about, I don't know how many minutes, several minutes trying to switch off my alarm clock, not understanding really why it wouldn't stop ringing.

It turned out to be the fire alarm, and I was completely disorientated, certainly not ready for action until some time had elapsed.

[13:19] Jesus doesn't want us to be asleep in our pajamas with the light out. He wants us to be alert, awake, ready to respond. This is to be the posture of the Christian disciple.

He wants us to be alert, awake, prepared, not slumped in the armchair of spiritual ease, not distracted by the things of this world, but standing like a servant who knows his master may knock at any hour.

You may remember Peter in his first epistle writes this, therefore prepare your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus wants us to be living in the here and now with the ready expectation of his return. If the servants in the house are expecting their master at any time, then they will be ready.

If they think he won't be coming back, then they will go to their beds and fall asleep. Friends, we live in a world that has been plunged into moral darkness.

[14:28] Many people are asleep in that darkness, and the Lord's return will be a shock and a surprise. For it's those that are ready and those that are awake who will receive great blessing from the master.

Look at verses 37 and 38. 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 the third and finds them awake, blessed are those servants. Easy to miss the striking response of the master here.

Not at all what we might expect. He's so pleased to find them awake that he serves them. They enjoy a feast to celebrate his return. What a master this is.

He's kind, he's gracious and thoughtful. The master, you see, becomes the servant. The Lord of the house waits on his own people at table. You see what's being said here?

[15:34] It's, I think, a glimpse, really, of the upside-down kingdom of God. The one who came not to be served but to serve. The one who washed his disciples' feet.

The one who on the cross took the very lowest place. That same Lord will one day welcome his faithful ones with a joy and an honor that they could scarcely imagine.

It's not without reason that Jesus said to his followers, I am among you as one who serves because he is the servant king. But, of course, the servants don't know when the master will return.

You may have had the experience of waiting in the house for a tradesman or someone to come. And you'll know that they often give a time. But experience tells us that often such appointment times are fiction and a fantasy.

But if we're desperate to have the work done, we remain in the house waiting for the knock on the door, the ring of the bell. And we know that if we leave the house, even for a moment, when we return, there will be a card in the door saying that the tradesman called.

[16:49] No one was home. And so we get ready. And we watch out for their coming. And Jesus touches on this attitude, really, with a short parable in verses 37-40.

Know this, he says, If the master, verse 39, of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left this house to be broken into. You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you don't expect.

This timing is known only to God himself. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5 that he will come like a thief in the night.

There won't be a news bulletin. There won't be an announcement on the radio. Politicians, economists, religious leaders, governments, theologians, none of them know when the Lord will return.

And so, you see, we must be in a constant state of readiness. And what Jesus is urging here is a mindset really that factors in the possibility of the Lord's return each day of our lives.

[17:55] He wants us to live today with the expectation of that great tomorrow. Robert Murray McShane once asked a group of ministers at a fraternal if they thought the Lord would return that day.

He went round the group, and they all answered in the negatives. And then McShane simply said, At an hour ye expect not.

It's a story told of a traveler who happened on a lovely secluded estate on the shore of one of Switzerland's tranquil lakes.

He rang a bell at the gate. An aged caretaker invited him in. The caretaker was delighted to see the man. He escorted him through well-kept, pristine grounds.

And the tourist asked, How long have you been here? He said, Well, 24 years. How often has your master returned? Four times. When was he last here? About 12 years ago.

[18:54] I'm almost always alone. Very seldom do I have a visitor. And the visitor, the tourist eager to pray, said, You have the gardens in such perfect condition.

It's as if you were expecting your master tomorrow. No, sir. Came the correction. I have them ready as if he were coming today. And that's the attitude Jesus is looking for in his disciples.

He's saying to us here in these verses, People, get ready. Live every day in expectation of Christ's return. We need to think about the Lord's return.

Not so that we can speculate about it. But rather so that we might live in the light of its reality. And that our minds and hearts be prepared for our master's return.

That brings me to the second thing here that Jesus teaches. Not just readiness or preparedness. But secondly, faithfulness. Jesus wants us to be faithful in his service.

[20:03] Yes, we have to have a mindset of readiness. But we then have to live lives of faithfulness. And this last section takes up the thought of service and stewardship in the kingdom of God.

And a kind of contrast is drawn between those who are faithful managers or stewards and those who are unfaithful. Lord, are you telling 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.

Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. In Thessalonica, when Paul spoke about waiting for the Lord's return, some of the congregation there took him literally and just sat about waiting for him to arrive.

But that's not really what Paul had taught them. And it's certainly not what Jesus taught. Here's some words. I do not think in the last 40 years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return.

[21:23] Those words, famous words spoken by Anthony Ashley Cooper, better known as Lord Shaftesbury. A man who did more to improve the welfare of the poor and disadvantaged in 19th century Britain than any other individual.

When you read his story, it is absolutely astonishing. He reformed the treatment of the insane, pioneered legislation against the exploitation of labor and factories, sponsored low-cost urban

housing, free education for destitute children.

One of his biographers writes, no one has done more to lessen the extent of human misery and add to the sum of total human happiness. And Shaftesbury was a Christian.

He was a leader in the evangelical wing of the Church of England. He was president of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Sometimes Christians are accused of being too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use.

And Shaftesbury's life and testimony just shows how spurious and misguided that analysis is.

Shaftesbury's biblical faith inspired his reforming zeal.

[22 : 32] And tragically, that kind of perspective is much diminished in many of our churches and perhaps even in our own hearts.

Maybe that's why we make so little impact upon the world. Thinking about the Lord's return should inspire us to greater service in the here and now.

It should encourage not a retreat from the world, but greater engagement with the world. A service not driven by fear, but by a longing and a desire to be ready for the Master we love.

Because we know that He first loved us and wants to serve us. The faithful servant, Jesus says, will be given more responsibility when the Lord returns.

His service or her service will be acknowledged and rewarded. And Jesus calls us to be faithful to Him and the calling that He has laid upon us.

[23 : 36] I think these verses, of course, they're applicable to ministers of the gospel, but to all of us as Christians. We are all, in a sense, stewards of the gospel. We've all been given responsibility by Christ to be faithful.

Faithful husbands, faithful wives, faithful children, faithful employees, faithful neighbors. Jesus wants us to live out our relationship with Him with a faithfulness born of love and devotion to Him, our heavenly Master.

But, He says, verse 45, if that servant says to himself, my Master is delayed in coming and begins to beat the male and female servants and to eat and drink and get drunk, the Master of that servant will come on a day when He does not expect Him, an hour He does not know, and He will cut Him in pieces and put Him with the unfaithful.

It's interesting what the unfaithful servant says here. He says to Himself, my Master is delayed in coming. He says this in His heart to Himself.

He doesn't say it out loud. He doesn't say it to others. He says it to Himself. Because faithfulness and unfaithfulness is always ultimately a matter of the heart.

[25 : 04] It begins there, in what we are telling ourselves. No one else might know, but God knows what's in your heart. He knows what you're saying to yourself.

He knows what you're thinking. And yes, we can all put a good show on for others, but eventually the truth will out. All will be revealed. Unfaithfulness eventually works itself out in conduct and behavior.

And that's why we need to guard our hearts. We need to love and cherish the Lord Jesus. We need to put Him first, because when we allow other things to worm their way into our affections, untold damage can be caused.

We end up serving only ourselves. And so we must battle with desire and our misplaced desires and lusts that so often crave attention and control and excitement and status.

Because these things can only be defeated by a much stronger desire. A desire for what is good and true and noble. A desire for Jesus Christ Himself. Only when our Christ is big enough to satisfy us can we become content in all circumstances.

[26 : 19] And that love for God, that love for Jesus, is the great effect, you see, of the gospel. It's this love that makes the world less attractive and enables us to resist the temptations of sin.

It's this love that keeps us faithful, even in the hidden places. It's this love that causes us to stand in the day of trial and testing. And so time and time again, we must return to Christ and to His redeeming grace.

And the 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. And everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required. And from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

Somber, challenging words. Really, what is he saying? Unfaithful servants will be treated like unbelievers. Indeed, if we live as if we believe the master is not coming back, and if we will never be held to account, then we are living as unbelievers.

[27 : 37] Because all human beings are accountable to our Creator. We are all, every single one of us, accountable to God. Especially those of us who claim to know Him, love Him, and serve Him.

As Christian disciples, we've been entrusted with much, and so in a sense, much is required of us. Here's J.C. Ryle, his comments. What are we doing ourselves with our religious knowledge? Are we using it wisely and turning it to good account? Or are we content with the baron saying, we know it, we know it, and secretly flattering ourselves that the knowledge of the Lord's will makes us better than others, while that will is not done?

Let us beware of mistakes. The day will come when knowledge unimproved will be found the most perilous of possessions. Thousands will awake to find that in a lower place than the most ignorant and idolatrous heathen.

Their knowledge not used, their light not followed, will only add to their condemnation. To despise Jesus Christ, to neglect so great a salvation, is not a small matter.

[28 : 55] It's a serious rejection of His love and authority. And so it's important that we live in the light of the gospel. That we love and esteem the Lord Jesus in our hearts.

I remember years ago, being in a shop with our oldest boy, looking, he's wanting a poster for his room. And we were browsing, and there was one that stood out.

And this is how it shows you how long ago it was. It was from the film Gladiator. It was a picture of Russell Crowe standing in the arena, all in there, in all his armor.

the gladiator. And across the picture was a line of words that read, what we do in life echoes in eternity.

what we do in life echoes in eternity. Friends, if we would worship and praise Jesus Christ for all eternity, we need to be worshiping and praising Him today.

[29 : 56] we must be living for Him now. We must be trusting Him this evening. Do you love Him?

Do you trust Him? Are you living for Him? Are you ready for Him? Are you living faithfully? Are you living faithfully? Are you looking for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ with hope, with longing, not with terror, but with the joyful expectation of those who know that their Master is good?

And when He comes, He will gird Himself and serve us. He will wipe away every tear. He will come and welcome us into the very joy of His presence. And the servant who's been faithful will hear those words that make all the watching and waiting worthwhile.

Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord. He is full of compassion. He's full of mercy.

He's full of grace. Come to Him in all your sin, in all your guilt, in all your selfishness, and receive from Him His love and His forgiveness.

[31 : 08] And be transformed. Be changed. Be changed from the inside out. Be changed for eternity. Friends, be ready for His coming.

Be faithful in His service. There's an old hymn, not often sung nowadays. It has, as its closing verse, these words.

Let us labor for the Master from the dawn to setting sun. Let us talk of all His wondrous love and care.

Then when all of life is over and our work on earth is done and the role is called up yonder, I'll be there. Let's pray together.

God, our Father, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, would You be at work in our hearts and our minds that we might be a people ready for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 19] Lord, make us faithful servants of the Lord Jesus in these days that we might labor for Him from dawn to setting sun, that we might live not for ourselves but for His glory.

And we pray this and ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.