

Luke 12:35-48 (1984 NIV)
Our Present Response to Christ's Future Return

Introduction

Today's text has reference to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. I wonder what's on your mind when you think of the Second Coming. Some people anticipate some spectacular events to usher in the Second Coming. It was this anticipation that had some Christians rooted with abated breath when the clock struck midnight on 1 January 2000—humanity's entrance into the second millennium.

Many engineers and IT professionals were put on stand-by for that moment to come.

- Would the power station fail, throwing the land into darkness?
- Would airport control fail, bringing chaos to passenger traffic, or even more disastrously, causing planes to crash because of defective aviation system?
- And of course, would your bank account be sorely diminished because a number of zeroes were mistakenly written off the record?

I remember at that time I was in Jakarta visiting my brother-in-law. We were watching a special programme to usher in Y2K on TV. I must admit that when the clock struck midnight on 1 January 2000, I was hoping that the power supply would not fail; that everything would work. Thankfully, nothing disastrous or disruptive happened in Jakarta ... and in Singapore too. Life continued as per normal as the New Year festivities continued around the world.

At that moment, those who went over to their windows and looked up into the sky to watch not the fireworks, but the Lord's coming again must either be disappointed or relieved that nothing happened. My point is: when we talk of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, there is somehow this anticipation of the spectacular.

Perhaps John Wesley has some wisdom to offer us concerning how we are to respond today to Christ's future return. A lady once asked him that suppose he were to know that he would die at 12:00 midnight tomorrow, how would he spend the intervening time.

His reply was: "Just as I intend to spend it now. I would preach this evening at Gloucester and again at five tomorrow. After that I would ride to Tewkesbury and preach in the afternoon, and meet the societies in the evening. I would then go to Martin's house who expects to entertain me, talk and pray with his family as usual. Then I would retire to my room at 10:00 pm, commend myself to God, lie down to rest and wake up in glory."

Indeed, we are to respond like Wesley to the Lord's coming again with our usual faithfulness today. This implies that we are now to cultivate a pattern of living faithfully to His will, and carry on with it until He comes. When we live with our usual pattern of faith and faithfulness, there is no need for any drastic change of lifestyle in anticipation of some spectacular events to happen.

(<https://www.characterjournal.com/things-as-usual-for-wesley>)

Our text today also points us to living a life of usual faithfulness in view of Christ's anticipated return. The whole of Luke 12 has an emphasis on stewardship.

- In vv. 1-12, Jesus addresses the disciples' stewardship of the Gospel. They must make good use of the Gospel by boldly living and proclaiming it.
- In vv. 13-34, Jesus addresses the stewardship of possessions. In the parable of the rich fool, we are reminded that our preoccupation must not be with the material life, but with the true life which relates intimately with God. This true life keeps us from overly worrying about our material well-being life, but challenges us to use what we already have to minister to others here on earth; to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven.
- In vv. 35-36, Jesus spells out three characteristics of a good watchman.
- In vv. 37-38, we have an assurance of blessing for those who are good watchmen of time.
- In vv. 39-40, we receive a warning about being caught unprepared.
- In vv. 41-48, we have an exhortation to faithfulness.

The Lord in our text today (Luke 12:35-48) pictures a rich middle-eastern man with a large household. He needed many servants to help him tend his property and fields. He was the master with unquestioned authority. Also, there were the servants who acted as stewards by being responsible to the master to what was going on. To have the master's household well looked after was to be faithful stewards who were willing to do the master's will. And within that household, the servants knew that faithfulness would bring blessings, but unfaithfulness would invoke the wrath of the master.

A crowd was listening to Jesus when He was telling this parable. Hence, the test of the crowd's teach-ability and receptivity is also our test today. Jesus was telling the crowd then, and is telling us today, how to respond now to His coming again. He alerts us that our response is not one of speculative-passive waiting. Rather, it is to ...

I. Keep doing that which shines forth the Gospel light in everyday life (vv. 35-40).

There are three elements in such a response.

- The first element has to do with getting ready. The Lord said in v. 35: “Be dressed ready for service.” In those days, they called it girding up your loins—i.e. tucking the long part of your flowing robes into your belts and be ready to work. The Lord gave a picture of a master who was away celebrating at a wedding banquet. In those days, such a celebration spanned over seven days. The master’s servants were to get themselves ready to open the door for the master immediately upon his return. In today’s language, getting ready is like responding to these words of the Lord to us: “Roll up your sleeves and your pants and get ready to work immediately when I need you.”
- The second element has to do with keeping ready. The Lord said in v. 35: “Keep your lamps burning.” The good servant is one who keeps on facilitating the master’s return—i.e. he keeps his lamp burning so that when the master is on his way home at a distance, he can see the light and knows that all things are in order. Hence, in keeping his lamp burning, the good servant is telling his master that everything is well taken care of during his absence, and that he is ready to welcome the master returning home. When the lamps are not burning, it signifies to the returning master that the oil has run out, or that the servants have forgotten, or that something is not quite in order. In today’s language, keeping ready is like responding to these words of the Lord to us: “Take care of things when I am away for when I return, I expect all systems to work.”
- The third element has to do with taking together “be dressed ready for service” and “keep your lamps burning” as an exhortation for us to get and keep ready not by way of speculative-passive waiting, but anticipative-vigilant working and watching. And there’s a significant difference between these two responses. Let me give an example.

When my girls were younger, there were times when my wife would bring them down to the void deck to watch for my return home. As the bus was about to pull over at the bus stop just in front of my block, I looked out and could see my girls straining their necks and trying to find me in the bus. And when I stepped down from the bus, they would immediately run to me with glee. They were watching for my return home. However, there were also times when they just stayed at home, and when I opened the door and stepped into the house, they would give me a “so-you’re-back” look. They were expecting me to return and were waiting for me at home.

Let me ask you: “Which reception makes my day better?” The first one right? The one in which they were watching for my return by coming down to watch out for my homecoming bus. On the part of my girls, their vigilant watching unlike passive waiting, would infuse into them expectancy and enthusiasm as they kept watch in anticipation of me returning home.

Friends, the Lord's return is certain even though we do not know the exact time. He wants to see us not in passive waiting, but in vigilant working and watching in anticipation of His return. He will return to a world darkened by sin. But He expects to see lights shining like burning lamps on His return. Where do these lights come from? From you and me—i.e. we are to shine as His light in a world darkened by sin; and to keep on shining even as we watch for the His return. The Lord wants our lives to shine for Him so that more and more darkened minds of unbelieving people will be enlightened. The reason why the Lord is still yet to come is because He is still calling us to shine the Gospel light, pointing lost people to Him.

Yes, the Gospel light is about God's salvation in Jesus Christ. It is about salvation that comes as a result of reconciliation with God Himself. Indeed, when the Lord Jesus comes again, He is coming to gather unto Himself those who have been reconciled to God in Him. That's why the Gospel light is about the ministry of reconciliation—not only man with God, but man with man as well. Therein lies what we must be “dressed ready and burning to do” as people who have been reconciled to God, and working and watching vigilantly for Jesus' return—i.e. bringing God's reconciliation to lost people, and reconciling ourselves with one other.

That means recognizing that people need God and one another. To claim that one needs God only and no other is to hide some kind of self-serving individualism behind the name of God.

If anyone had enough reasons to think that his relationship with God was all that he needed it must be Adam. He could say to God: “You created me. You gave me this garden and all the animals and plants in it. You put me in charge over all these. Together we can handle all things. God, just you and me will do!”

But this was not what God revealed to Adam. Yes, God gave Adam food, satisfying his physical needs. Yes, God gave Adam His fellowship, satisfying his spiritual and even relational needs. But then it was until Eve came to the scene that God said that it was very good. This is not to tell us that man without woman is a miserable person, or vice versa. Rather, it is to impress the point that without human relationships, there would be a missing dimension in Adam's life. It is not that even the fellowship of God is not good enough; it is because God Himself has chosen to bless us through the dynamics of human relationships. Hence, even though Adam had God all to himself, God still said that it was not good for him because he was still alone. God went on to give Adam the woman Eve. Indeed as a relational being, man needs God AND others as well. Meeting our relational needs through others was God's design.

Another way to say “I only need God” is to put it in the second person—i.e. “you only need God.” And the reason why it is not always good theology to say that “you only need God” is because it can adversely affect our ministry to people. For example, we say:

- “You lost your job but it’s wrong to feel despondent at this time. God will provide. You only need God.”
- “Nobody has encouraged you despite all your hard work, but it’s wrong to look for human appreciation. Your reward is in heaven. You only need God.”
- “Someone has hurt you badly, but it’s wrong to feel angry with that person. God will judge him one day. You only need God.”

What about Jesus Christ when He was agonizing at Gethsemane? He said to His three close ones: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me” (Matt. 26:38). Was God there with Jesus at that time? Yes, He was. Why then did Jesus need His three close disciples—Peter, James, and John—to stay close? Because Jesus Christ in His full humanity was teaching this point: to be fully human as spiritual and relational beings, we need both God and others. To say that you need only God and no one else is to be less than human because that’s not what God has designed us to be.

We in the church need God and one another; lost people of the world need God and His people to shine forth the light of God’s reconciliation. People need to be reconciled with God and with one another. When Jesus (the Master) returns, this is what He wants to find us (His servants) ready to do and busy doing. Just as the master in our text is returning to his house as guided by the burning lamps, Jesus Christ will be returning to His “house” (i.e. the people of God) to claim all that rightly belongs to Him as He’s being drawn by the lives of believers shining for Him in a world darkened by sin.

Shortly after the turn of the last century, Japan invaded and occupied Korea. They treated the Koreans with brutality and ruthlessness. Many Koreans live today with the physical and emotional scars from the Japanese occupation.

The Japanese army oppressed the Christians severely—they shut down churches and sacked foreign missionaries. One pastor persistently entreated his local Japanese police chief to allow him to start services. The police chief finally accommodated and unlocked the pastor’s church for one meeting only. News spread and many Koreans throughout a wide area made their way to the church. As the church doors shut behind them, their voices of praise unto God could not be contained.

Then, unknown to them, the Japanese police chief outside ordered that the church doors be barricaded and the wooden church building be doused with kerosene. Soon, the whole building was turned into a fireball. As some of the worshippers rushed to the windows, they were mercilessly gunned down by a hail of bullets. The pastor knew that it was the end, but with a calm and confident spirit, he led his people in a hymn of hope and joy. Soon, the singing and wailing of children were lost in a roar of flames.

The Koreans could not curb their pain and bitterness. They built a memorial at the site of the burnt down church for those who died. In 1972, a group of Japanese pastors came upon the memorial. When they discovered the story behind it, they were overcome with shame. Their country had sinned. They returned to Japan, committed to right a wrong. They raised ten million yen and sent the money through proper channels, and a beautiful white church was erected on the site of the tragedy.

When the dedication was held, a delegation from Japan joined the relatives and special guests. The Japanese generosity and attempts to make peace were appreciated. But the pain and wounds were just too deep.

At the close of the service, someone suggested that the two hymns sung on the day when the church was burnt be used to conclude the worship—“Nearer My God to Thee” and “At the Cross”. As they came to the second—i.e. “At the Cross”—the Japanese visitors couldn’t control themselves. Tears began to fill their eyes and they began to beg their Korean hosts for forgiveness.

One Korean turned to embrace a Japanese brother. Then another ... and another. And the floodgates holding back a wave of emotions began to crash down. They clung to each other and wept bitterly—tears of repentance intermingled with tears of forgiveness.

God had sent His gift of reconciliation because these people were there for one another, reconciling themselves first with God and then with one another; seeking forgiveness and extending forgiveness.

(<https://bible.org/illustration/hatred-preserves-pain>)

Yes, people need God and people need one another. And one way we act as working and watchful servants for the Lord as we await His return is not to be overly busy with the future, but with the present. At this present time, the Lord wants us to be ready for and be busy in the ministry of reconciliation—first with God, then with one another, and in turn shine the Gospel light gloriously to the lost people of the world.

Indeed, if God has designed us to be relational beings, then He also desires us to be fulfilled relationally—with Him and with one another. Reconciliation enhances relationships; retaliation endangers that. Hence, the ministry of reconciliation in a world darkened by sin, pain, hurt, and hatred is a priority for the people of God as they await the Lord’s return. It is the work of God’s people to one another and their witness to the lost world at the same time. May we always “be dressed ready and keep our lamps burning”—i.e. keep on and keep up with this ministry of reconciliation until Jesus Christ returns.

This will be one way we welcome the Lord when He returns. Our text also tells us that when the Lord finds us faithfully serving His call to us on His return, He will give us a great blessing in v. 37—i.e. He Himself will serve and wait on us. Our Lord does not consider serving and waiting on us as something demeaning for Him to do when He returns.

What about us? Is there anything we consider too demeaning for us to do now even if it is in accordance to His call for us—e.g. to say sorry; to admit wrong; to seek forgiveness?

But in contrast to the imagery of a “welcome master”, Jesus also uses another imagery in our text today—that of an “unwelcome thief” in v. 39. On one hand, Jesus is like the master who will come back to his own house for sure even though the exact time is not certain. Hence, his own people must keep watch and be faithful in doing what they have been called to do till His return.

On the other hand, Jesus is like the “thief” in the sense that the time of His coming is unknown just as when the thief will break in is unknown. This sense of uncertainty is meant not only to keep us constantly ready and anticipative for the future, but also to keep us faithfully doing what we should be doing until the time of the Lord’s return is here.

Jesus says to Peter and His disciples in John 13:36: “Where I am going you cannot follow me, but you will follow later.” And to impress upon His people what He is calling and expecting them to do during this intervening period, Jesus says to His disciples just two verses above in John 13:34-35 – “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” This is what we have been called to do and to keep faithfully doing until the Lord returns—loving God and loving others to the end that the world may see and know the love of God for them in and through us.

The first way we can respond to the Lord’s return today is to keep doing that which shines forth the Gospel light in everyday life. The second way we can respond is to ...

II. Bless others freely just as we have been graciously blessed by the Lord (vv. 41-48).

Peter asks the Lord in v. 41: “Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?” Jesus then goes on to tell the difference between the “faithful and wise manager” and the one who is not. The faithful one will be rewarded by given charge over all the master’s possessions (v. 44), but the unfaithful one will be “cut to pieces and assigned to a place with the unbelievers” (v. 46).

Now, there is a theological concern here. If Jesus is here talking about the future of His people when He returns, then it seems that faithful Christians will be rewarded, but unfaithful Christians will be “cut to pieces and assigned to a place with the unbelievers”. Does it mean that if Christians do not remain faithful, their

unfaithfulness will bring them to this place of torment assigned to unbelievers? If that is the case, then is God's salvation ultimately based on His grace through faith in Jesus Christ, or is it on our good works till the Lord comes again?

I believe the best way to answer this question is to ask another question: To whom does the "servant" or "manager" here refer? In Luke 12:1, we read: "Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: 'Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy ...'"

Indeed when Jesus was telling His two parables recorded for us in Luke 12 (vv. 35-40 and vv. 42-48), you must remember that there was a crowd listening to Him. That's why Peter had to ask Him in v. 41: "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?" There was a crowd comprising the disciples, the believing Jews, as well as the unbelieving Jews (with the Pharisees among them).

I suggest to you that it is in this light that we must understand what Jesus is teaching here. The servants or managers in the second parable from vv. 42-48 refer to the nation of Israel as represented by the Jewish crowd before Him. Some among the crowd believe in Jesus—the disciples and others, but some do not—like the Pharisees among them. But whether they believe in Jesus or not, it is undeniable that as Jews (the chosen people of God), they have received a great spiritual heritage from God. And this entails both the privileges and responsibilities of spiritual stewardship.

Thus, the faithful and wise manager in Jesus' second parable is that Jew who has come to believe in Jesus as the one to whom Scripture has been pointing to since the days of old. The unfaithful servant is that Jew who has rejected Jesus as the one sent by God in spite of all the Scripture he has and knows.

Hence, when a puzzled Peter asks Him if He is telling the earlier parable (vv. 35-40) to them or to everyone, Jesus uses his question to give a cryptic rebuke to the unbelieving Jews among the crowd in His second parable (vv. 42-48). They are like the unfaithful servant—given so much promises by God yet responding to Him by rejecting His promised Son. They are cut to pieces and assigned to be with the unbelievers not because they are believers fallen from grace, but they are unbelievers who have remained hardened in their unbelief right to the end when Jesus comes. They lost the opportunity; they have not responded to the Gospel light given generously to them; the offer of salvation ends; and judgment comes.

But I think the part which is most directly relevant to us today is vv. 47-48: "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

Let me caution here that this is not a way for us to play smart—i.e. if we do not want to be penalised more severely, we just remain on the side of ignorance because the less we know, the less guilty we are. So, don't ask God to show you His will because the more you know it, the more you are held responsible by God to act upon that knowledge.

But as I have said, Jesus is not here teaching us to play smart by being more ignorant—the less you know, the less you are held responsible. Rather, Jesus is here reminding us that the more blessed we are, the more we are expected and demanded by God to use that which He has blessed us with. We all want to be much blessed, don't we? But remember, the more blessed we are by God, the more is expected and demanded from us by Him.

“To whom much is given much is required”—what does this mean from a biblical perspective? Let's try to understand it by way of three truths.

- First, no one is to live only for himself. This implies we are to bear in mind that whatever we do, we are not only doing it for ourselves but also for the benefit of others. The Lord Jesus reminds us that “it is more blessed to give than to receive”. Therefore, we are to wholeheartedly give what we can because God has given us graciously and even generously. However, human as we are, we often forget that it is God's will for us to give to others as graciously and generously as we have received from Him.
- Second, there is great responsibility for what we have received. Yes, when God is gracious and generous to His people, it also means He holds them responsible for using well what He has given them. In fact, Luke 12:48 says it even more emphatically, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded ...” The word “demand” implies something should be obeyed/followed because as Rom. 14:10 reminds us, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” It means we are accountable to God and so we should not be complacent in accepting His gifts. Rather, we should use them responsibly for the benefit of His kingdom. However we should not boast if we have done good deeds, but rather be thankful for God's grace and generosity. He is the reason why we can do gracious and generous things.
- Third, our God-given talents should be exercised. We glorify God by exercising our talents. Eph. 2:10 reminds us, “For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” This verse specifically states that God has prepared in advance for us to use our given talents for good and to exalt Him.

Conclusion

The Lord's future for us is sure. However, He expects us NOT to be so heavenly minded about the future that we are of no earthly good for the present. He wants us to respond to His future return by doing that which shines forth the Gospel

light in everyday life, and by using freely that which we have received from Him to bless others here on earth.

Let's seek the Lord to help us remain vigilant for His future return NOT by speculatively waiting; but by anticipatively working, watching, and praying as we ...

- Exercise faith and faithfulness in what He has called us to do at where He has placed us to be.
- Employ our God-given resources/gifts/talents to make a difference in our world and to glorify Him.

Amen!