

Mark 13:24-27, 32-37 (focus on vv. 32-37)¹

Be Watchful

24 But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;

25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

26 At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

32 No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

34 It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

35 Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.

36 If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.

37 What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!”

Introduction

When Jesus first came to earth, He came as the Saviour of the world. Those who believe in Him then become children of God. The Bible also tells us that Jesus will come again. But this time, He will come as the Judge of the world. And those who believe in Him today. Christians await this glorious return of the Lord. This is the day when the Lord will gather all Christian believers unto Himself.

Jesus Himself in Mk 13:26-27 depicts His glorious return and the ingathering of believers this way—“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”

Jesus is here referring to Himself as the Son of Man in terms that Jewish literature usually reserved for God, i.e. coming in glory and sending His angels. And His people are called his elect in that they are given the blessing of being gathered unto the Lord when He returns. This is the glorious future that all believers are to earnestly anticipate. They are now already belonging to Christ, but they have yet to be gathered by the Lord unto Himself. This will only happen at the Lord’s return. This is the “now and not yet” dimension that

¹ 1984 NIV

every believer is living in. And it is often not easy to handle.

I remember the day when my wife gave birth to our elder daughter by Caesarean section. I was asked to wait at the maternity ward. I was pacing up and down the corridor of the ward with much anticipation and anxiety. The time seemed to pass by so slowly.

I was very sure that I was already a father. At the same time, I felt that I was not yet a father because I have yet to see my new-born child moved out from the theatre. I was living in the now and not yet. It was agonizing

Naturally, I didn't have the mood to go to sleep while waiting for my new baby to be wheeled out. What did I do? I kept watch with my eyes and ears wide open, looking and listening intently for the theatre door to open and for any sound of a baby crying. The waiting was agonizing, and the anticipation of what was to come was like trying to hold back some inner joy that was waiting to burst out into a rush of emotions.

Indeed, when my new baby was eventually wheeled out of the theatre, I was her first parent to welcome her into this world (my wife was still dozey under anaesthesia). I had kept watch as I lived in the now and not yet.

Using the event of His coming in Mk 13:24-27 as a backdrop, Jesus tells His disciples in vv. 32-37 what He expects them to be doing using a parable. He tells them how they should live in the now and not yet while waiting for His coming again.

Even in New Testament times, there were groups of people who had chosen to move away from the mainstream of society to live as end-time communities. They believed that they must divorce themselves from the snares of this present world and be focused on the realities of the future end. Hence, they were so passionate longing for the future that they became totally disinterested in living for the present.

But here in Mk 13, Jesus refutes this lifestyle by telling His disciples that to long passionately for the future (the not yet), they must live purposefully for the present (the now).

How then does Jesus teach His people to live purposefully in the now and not yet?

I. The Call to be Alert (vv. 32-34)

Jesus says in vv. 32-33 – “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.”

©2020 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

God alone is in charge of His own timetable. In fact, the return of Christ will come without warning. There will not be time for any last-minute preparations. Thus, the wise thing to do is not to look for signs to pre-empt the event, but to be prepared for it even now—be on guard! be alert! Literally, it means be awake, chase away your sleep, open your eyes and look!

Hence, speculations about how current events relate to the return of Christ are largely futile. Spiritual vigilance and prudence, both in crisis and in calm, are what matter for Christians today. Thus, the one who argues that there is no need to take life here on earth seriously since Christ may return anytime soon is in danger of losing interest in Christian faithfulness, and letting down his guard and slackening his alertness.

Jesus warns against such a letting down and slackening by telling a parable in v. 34. He teaches that the disciples' anticipation of and preparation for His return is like a man going away. He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Jesus is telling His disciples that while God takes care of His timetable, His people are to take care of their tasks, not neglecting their faithfulness. In the Jewish household, servants held many roles. However, the one who keeps watch at the door (doorkeeper) is actually a prominent servant. This is because he holds the master's keys, and he keeps out unwanted people. And with this relative prestige of the doorkeeper's position, comes great responsibility as well.

Because there is no warning when the master will return, the doorkeeper must always keep alert throughout the watches of the night. One moment's sleep may allow an intruder to sneak in, or the master may return and charge him for neglect of duty. Of course, the doorkeeper can only do his duties well if he keeps up his guard and alertness, not wasting time speculating when the master will return. Hence, the doorkeeper must work faithfully, not speculatively, because the master WILL return (period). The doorkeeper who loses his sense of expectation that the master will return anytime is the one who falls asleep on the job.

The doorkeeper is a prominent servant who holds the master's keys. I believe Jesus is here giving a special word to His disciples who would later become the apostles of the church. Today, such doorkeepers would refer to the leaders of the church (pastors, elders, deacons, etc.) who are charged with the task of proclaiming the gospel, preaching the Word and protecting the congregation. And Jesus special word to His disciples then, and to the spiritual leaders of the church today, is this be on guard! be alert!

The leaders of the church today must believe that Christ will come again. Since they know for sure that Christ will return, but do not know when He will

return, they have to be on guard, on alert. Indeed, making every conscious effort to live for Christ is no sleeping matter.

By moving from describing the event of His return in vv. 24-27 to telling the parable in vv. 32-37, Jesus is teaching His disciples then, and Christians today (especially church leaders), that living in the now and not yet is not a matter of curiosity about the mysteries of the future, but of commitment about facing the realities of the present. Indeed, the promised return of Christ in the future does not undermine the value and significance of living for the present.

There is one crucial task that the Lord wants church leaders to undertake today in the face of present realities. It is the task of guarding and protecting the purity of the church. They are to keep their eyes open to deceiving teachings and practices from defiling the purity of the church.

Indeed, as doorkeepers, the Lord expects church leaders to guard and protect first themselves, and then the people against false teachings and practices from intruding into the church. Many church leaders have been lured away by the culture of the day. They must continue to do the right thing before God rather than the popular thing before men; continue to live as people true to Scripture.

Church leaders are to be examples of what it means to love God because of His goodness, and to fear Him because of His holiness. It is easier to talk of the love of God rather than the wrath of God. Hence, what is often played up is the grace and goodness of God, and what is often played down is the fear of His judgment against sin. Thus, it is paramount for leaders to lead their people to enjoy God's goodness and revere His holiness at the same time. And they do this by consistently upholding their love and fear of God in their words and lives before the people. A God-fearing leader does well when he allows others to make him accountable for his words and actions so that he can guard the purity of the church by being pure himself before anyone else.

How then does Jesus teach His people to live purposefully in the now and not yet? The Lord teaches that while God takes care of His timetable, His called leaders of the church (the doorkeepers) are to take care of their assigned tasks—one of which is to keep their eyes open to deceiving teachings and practices that defile the purity of the church.

The Lord also has a word for the rest of the church too in terms of living purposefully in the now and not yet.

II. The Parable on Keeping Watch (vv. 35-37)

The Lord says in v. 37, "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" Watchfulness is not only the responsibility of the doorkeepers of the church, but also that of the rest of the church as well. It is not an instruction for some people of the church for a past time or for a future time. Rather, it is for all the

people of God for all times. And this watchfulness is basically faithfulness.

There is one enormous force today that discourages us from staying at our post in Christian faithfulness. And this force is the choices we have today.

The late James Fowler was an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church in the US. He has written and lamented over how Christianity has been commercialized today. He observes that taking advantage of the many choices in life, enterprising Christians all over the world have established a thriving, global, fast-food business called McDeity. The trademark logo is the Golden Cross, and the slogan is “Fast Lane to Divine Servings”.

The meals served by McDeity include McWorship, McFellowship, McPrayer, McStudy, McEvangelism, and many others. These also come in special servings for men, women, children and elderly.

Publicity for the McDeity enterprise has been done through magazines, leaflets, banners, newspapers and even TV. Seasonal promotions during Easter and Christmas often draw in great crowds. Often, a charismatic figure called Ronald McPreacher is used for these promotion drives—he can sing, he can cry, he can joke, he can talk, he can do a host of other things.

McDeity caters to all kinds of people, especially those who want to be fed quickly and cheaply; quickly come and quickly go with no commitment to stay on any longer than necessary once you have your fill.

But beyond the hustle and bustle of the McDeity enterprise, those who feed themselves regularly on McDeity have been diagnosed to be suffering from malnutrition. The constant feeding on junk food has resulted in them growing lethargic rather than energetic.²

Indeed, the choices in life today have given rise to a Christian culture of God serving us. He is there to meet our needs. It is a culture that stresses on looking at and living for self. Such a culture has no spiritual vitality because it deceives the Christian that if he knows some facts about God, if he goes to church, if he gives some money to church, then he will be okay. God will have to take care of him and serve his needs and wants as and when demanded. Such a culture teaches not man's faithfulness to God, but demands God's faithfulness to man. It does not teach the need to look away from self. Hence, if there is any faithfulness, it is faithfulness to self, not to God or to others.

And how do we gauge if God is faithful to us in this culture? By how quickly

² https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=43655&forum=34

He responds to our prayers which in fact are our demands spoken in a sugar-coated manner. God is like a waiter waiting to serve His people. If He is slow in their estimation and makes them wait, then He is not worthy a God to believe in.

But the fact is that waiting is part and parcel of this life:

- Maybe you are in a job situation that's really tough to endure and you are waiting and hoping that conditions will change for the better.
- Maybe you are without a job and waiting for news on an application.
- Maybe you (or a loved one) are ill and waiting for your health to improve.
- Maybe you are a single person waiting for Mr or Miss Right to come into your life.
- Maybe you are waiting for your spouse or child to become interested in spiritual things.

But have you ever noticed that God is not in a hurry? It took 40 years for Moses to receive his commission to lead the people out of Egypt. It took 17 years of preparation before Joseph was delivered from slavery and imprisonment. It took 2 years before Jacob was released from Laban's control. Abraham and Sarah were in their old age when they finally received the son of promise, Isaac. So why isn't God in a hurry? Because God called each of these servants to be faithful in an assigned task, yet He was in no hurry to bring their mission into completion. Rather, He accomplished first what He wanted in them according to His timetable.

We are often more focused on outcome than the process that He is accomplishing in our lives each day. When we take time to open our eyes and watch His presence in our lives daily, one day we will realize that God has done something special in and through our lives.

However, the accomplishment is no longer what excites us. Instead, what excites us is knowing Him. Through those times, we become more acquainted with His love, grace, and power in our lives. When this happens, we are no longer focused on the outcome because the outcome is a result of our walk with Him. It is not the goal of our walk, but the by-product.

This is the lesson for us. We must wait for God's timing and embrace wherever we are in the process. When we find contentment in that place, we begin to experience God in ways we never thought possible.

We are all called to open our eyes and be watchful to make choices that bear eternal fruit. These are choices that lead us to an abundant life with the Lord here on earth till He returns—choices that nurture and mature our faithfulness to Him.

Edwin Thomas was a master stage actor in the 1800s. His first stage

©2020 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

play was Richard III at the age of fifteen. Soon, he quickly established himself as a leading Shakespearean actor. In New York he performed Hamlet for one hundred consecutive nights. In London he won the approval of the tough British critics.

Edwin had two brothers, John and Junius. Both were actors, although neither rose to his stature. In 1863, the three siblings united their talents to perform Julius Caesar. Edwin's brother John took the role of Brutus, the one who assassinated Julius Caesar. This John is the same John who on one night in 1865, stole quietly into the rear of a theatre box and fired a bullet at the head of Abraham Lincoln, then President of America.

Edwin was never the same after that night. Shame from his brother's crime drove him into retirement. He might never have returned to the stage had it not been for a twist of fate at a New Jersey train station. Edwin was awaiting his coach when a well-dressed young man, pressed by the crowd, lost his footing and fell between the platform and a moving train. Without hesitation, Edwin grabbed the man and pulled him to safety. After the sighs of relief, the young man recognized Edwin as the famous stage actor.

Edwin, however, didn't recognize the young man he'd rescued. That knowledge came weeks later in a letter written by a certain General Adams Budeau. The letter thanked Edwin for saving the life of the child of an American hero, Abraham Lincoln.

How ironic that while one brother killed the president, the other brother saved the president's son.³

There are many choices before us. Some lead us closer to God. Some lead us away from God. God allows us to make our own choices. But God does extend to us choices that bear eternal fruit. We are to keep our eyes open and be watchful of these choices that bear eternal fruit—they lead us to be named among those faithful to the Lord as we watch for His return.

Conclusion

The Lord calls on all His people (leaders and the rest) to long passionately for the future (the not yet), yet live purposefully for the present (the now). He calls on leaders today to keep their eyes open to deceiving teachings and practices that defile the purity of the church. And He calls on all to keep their eyes open and be watchful of choices that lead us to be named among those faithful to Him when He returns.

³ http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon3/edwin_thomas.htm