**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**BATTLING UNFAITHFULNESS**

**Luke 12:35-48**

**INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever had the same dream over and over again? When I was young, I used to have this recurring dream of running away from something that was chasing me. I didn’t know what it was, or why I was running. All I knew was that I felt scared of the thing chasing me, that I didn’t want to confront it, and that the only way to escape it was by running away.

Now that I’m older, I don’t have that dream any more. I have a different one. This one pops up maybe once a year, and it’s the only dream that I have in which I wake up feeling scared. This dream is a little different each time. Sometimes I’m preparing for an exam. Other times I’m getting ready to preach a sermon. But despite the different settings, the reason for my feelings of fear are the same: I’m not prepared.

It could be that I’m on my way to an exam and suddenly realize that I completely forgot to study. Or it could be that I’ve been called to do a jury trial but I have zero time to prepare. The settings may be different, but the focus of the dreams is the same. I’m not prepared, and it scares me.

Why does it scare me? What’s so bad about not being prepared? I find it interesting that I never dream of failing an exam after I studied my hardest. That doesn’t scare me. What scares me is failing because I failed to study. In other words, I don’t think I’m scared of failing. I’m scared of being unfaithful.

In our text today, Jesus is going to put the fear of God in our hearts as we make choices in this lifetime that will test our faithfulness. You see, whether you know it or not, each of us is writing an exam right now. The exam is our lives, the question is our faithfulness, and our examiner is Jesus himself. During the exam, our examiner has temporally left the room, but one day, he’ll return, and when he does, the exam will be over. He’ll tell us to put our pencils down and hand in our papers, and he will grade us on our faithfulness. Were we faithful with what he gave us responsibility for, or were we unfaithful? Did we faithfully do all that he asked us to do, or did we do something else? That’s the question Jesus will ask about our lives when he returns, and the only way to prepare for it is by being faithful now, in this lifetime, with what he has entrusted to us.

**Read Luke 12:35-48**

This is the last of three warnings Jesus gives to his disciples in Luke 12. We looked at the first two warnings last month in the sermons titled **Battling Hypocrisy** and **Battling Greed**. We look at the third warning today in this message titled **Battling Unfaithfulness.** My aim today is to show you that **Faithfulness is Fueled by the Hope of Christ’s Return.**

Our outline today is as follows:

1. Three Parables
2. Three Realities
3. Three Applications

The first section will be an overview of the three parables so that we understand what Jesus is saying. The second section will dig a little deeper into the parables to see three realities about Jesus’ second coming that will help us live faithful lives as we get ready for Jesus’ coming. The third section will contain three practical applications for what we can do now to apply what we see in our text.

(1) **THREE PARABLES**

Let’s start with the context. Jesus has just finished his teaching on the dangers of greed. He taught us that the root of greed is anxiety. We accumulate because we worry. Jesus addresses our inclinations towards greed by telling us we don’t need to worry, because God is our Heavenly Father, and he will provide for all our needs. He then ends that teaching by challenging his disciples not only to stop being greedy, but to start being generous. They are to wisely and generously sell their possessions and give to the needy, because the less treasure they have on earth, the more treasure they will have in heaven.

Jesus ends that section on greed with these startling words in verse 34:

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

In other words, Jesus is concerned about where we’re keeping our treasures, because he is concerned about where we’re keeping our hearts. He doesn’t want the things we love most to be found in this world, because everything in this world is passing away and temporary. Instead, he wants us to love the things of heaven, because those things will never fade away. They will abide forever.

This context of becoming heavenly minded continues in our text, except now, Jesus shifts the focus from heaven to himself. He stops talking about our heavenly home and starts talking about our heavenly king. And what he says is that he’s coming back one day, and that we are to orient our lives in hopeful expectation of that day. The entirety of life is to be structured, planned, and focused on the glorious, future reality of Jesus’ return, because when he returns, he will hold us accountable for our faithfulness.

Jesus hammers home this future reality in a series of three parables found in our text. In different ways, he’s telling us that he’s leaving for a time, he’s coming back one day, and until he comes back, he wants us to be faithful in fulfilling the responsibilities that he has given us.

In the first parable from verses 35-38, Jesus uses the example of a master who has left his home in charge of his servants while he attends a wedding feast. He instructs his servants to wait for his return, to “stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning” as verse 35 says, so that, as verse 36 says, “they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.”

The phrase “stay dressed” is literally “gird up your loins”. In those days, men would wear long garments that reached down to their ankles. It’s not difficult to imagine how difficult it would have been to move around quickly while wearing such clothing. So if men ever had to run somewhere, they would gather up the lower half of their garment and tuck it into the belt around their waist.

That’s the picture we need to have in our minds when Jesus says, “Stay dressed for action” in verse 35. We are to picture a man with all his clothes bundled up around his waist so that, at a moment’s notice, he’s ready to run as fast as he can to wherever he needs to go. In addition, Jesus says that the servant must keep his lamp burning, meaning that he must always be ready to serve. Day or night, it doesn’t matter. The lamp never goes out, and the clothes never come untucked. This servant is ready to serve immediately upon his master’s return, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Jesus makes the same point in the second parable in verses 39-40, but he uses a different image. In this parable, Jesus now makes us the master of the house, and he makes himself a thief in the night. Jesus says in verse 39 that, if the master of the house knew when the thief was coming, he wouldn’t leave his house and leave it exposed to the thief. He’d stay, and remain watchful. Jesus says we need to do the same. We need to be ever watchful for Jesus’ return, because he will come like a thief in the night at the most unexpected time.

The third parable is the longest, stretching from verses 41-48. Once again, Jesus uses the example of a master who is leaving his home for a time, but this time, his instructions to his servants are a little different. Instead of just telling his servants to wait for him, he now chooses one servant and sets him over his household to feed and care for his other servants in verse 43.

Now, at this point, the parable goes one of four directions. It’s like one of those “choose your own adventure” books where you as the reader get to make certain decisions that lead you to different plot twists in the book.

* The first way you can go is that of the blessed servant in verse 43. This is the one who does exactly what the master asks him to do. The blessed servant receives the reward of greater responsibility when the master returns.
* The second way is that of the unfaithful servant in verse 45. This is the one who not only fails to obey his master, but abuses his authority by beating his fellow servants and indulging himself. The unfaithful servant is cut in pieces – literally cut in half – and cast out of his master’s household to dwell with the unfaithful.
* The third way is that of the lazy servant in verse 47. He knows what his master wants him to do, but he simply fails to do it. He won’t be cut up, but he will receive a severe beating.
* The fourth and final way is that of the ignorant servant in verse 48. This one didn’t do what his master wanted him to do because he didn’t know what his master required. He won’t be cut up or receive a severe beating, but he will still receive a light beating.

Now the key question about this text is who is Jesus talking about? Who are the servants in the first two parables, and who is the servant-manager in the third parable? Are the parables only for the apostles? Are they for all disciples? Or are they for all people? The Apostle Peter had the same question after Jesus taught the first two parables in verse 41, where he asks, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?”

As we have often seen Jesus do, he decides not to answer the question directly. Instead, he answers Peter’s question by beginning his third parable with the question, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household?”

Why does Jesus answer this way? That’s not an easy question to answer. In order to understand why Jesus answers this way, we need to know who Jesus is talking about in the third parable. All the commentators I read believe that the third parable is primarily directed to church leaders. They are the ones whom Jesus has “set over his household”, to lead, care for, and feed Jesus’ people. Every believer is called to wait and watch in the first two parables, but special responsibilities rest on those who are put in leadership.

In other words, as Peter wonders whether the first two parables apply to him, Jesus responds by giving Peter another parable that specifically applies to him and those who are like him. In effect, Jesus is saying, “Do you want to know what responsibilities you have Peter? I’ll tell you. Not only do you have to watch and wait for my return. You have to feed and care for those in my household as well.”

In summary, we have three parables, but one common message: Jesus is coming back, and he’s going to hold us accountable for how we fulfilled our responsibilities while he was gone. He’s going to judge us for our faithfulness. What faithfulness will look like will depend on our responsibilities. There are some responsibilities that are common to all of us. We’re all responsible for how we used our money, time, and energy; whether we obeyed God’s commands, etc., but there are some responsibilities that are reserved for certain people. As a pastor, I’m responsible for preaching the Word and shepherding my flock. I will be judged for whether I was faithful in fulfilling these responsibilities, but you won’t, because you’re not responsible for that. Parents are responsible for raising their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, but those who don’t have kids are not. Jesus will judge us for our faithfulness, and our faithfulness will depend on our responsibilities.

(2) **THREE REALITIES**

The reality, however, is that staying faithful is hard. Life is tough. It’s full of temptations and snares that can sidetrack us, bring us down, and make our hearts cold towards God. How do we stay faithful? How do we stay dressed for action and keep our lamps burning 24/7?

This leads us to our next section. Jesus helps us remain faithful by giving us three promises about his coming kingdom that will become realities when he returns. Two of them are encouragements, and the third is a warning.

The first reality is found in the first parable. Look at verse 37, where Jesus says, “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.”

Do you see the irony in this verse? All day and all night long, for an untold number of days, these servants are waiting for their master to return. Their garments are bundled up around their waists and their lamps are burning so that, as soon as their master knocks on the door, they’re ready to open the door for him and serve him.

But this master is different. When he returns, he doesn’t start ordering them about. Get dinner ready! Wash my dirty clothes! Massage my aching feet! No, he doesn’t do any of that. Instead, this master, tired from a long journey, changes out of his dirty clothes, not so that he can get comfortable, but so that he can dress himself for service. And rather than seat himself at the table, he seats his servants, and he attends to their needs by serving them.

This is absolutely amazing. We’re not that well acquainted with the concept of a master these days, but not so with Jesus’ original audience. They would have been well acquainted with all different types of masters. Authoritarian masters. Demanding masters. Cruel masters. Once in awhile, they may have heard of a kind and gentle master, a master that treated his servants with dignity and respect, a master that would have stood out from the crowd. But this master in verse 37 far exceeds the kindest master that any of them would have heard of. A master who serves his servants? A master who is willing to put on the lowly garments of a servant, and have his servants rest comfortably at the table while he serves *them*? Such a master was simply unheard of. But here he is in the person of Jesus Christ. The King of Kings becomes the servant of servants.

This is what awaits those who faithfully wait for Jesus’ return: honour given to us by the one who deserves all honour. We live to honour him, but it is his great delight to honour us. This is the first promise about Jesus’ coming that will fuel us in our fight for faithfulness.

But don’t miss what this is saying about Jesus. There’s something deeply profound and beautiful about the person of Christ that is revealed in verse 37. We know that when Jesus first came to the earth as a man, he humbled himself to serve. Mark 10:45 says,

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

While Jesus was on earth, his ministry was characterized by humble and faithful service. But what verse 37 tells us is that *nothing* changes about who Jesus is and what he does when he comes again. It remains his delight to serve. It doesn’t matter that, when he returns, he’ll come in the fullness of his power and glory. It doesn’t matter that, when he returns, he’ll usher in the fullness of his kingdom as he recreates reality and fashions a new heavens and a new earth. It will still be his delight to serve.

Why? Because humble service is part of who he is. Service isn’t just what he does. Service comes out of his servant heart. When Jesus became a man, he didn’t all of a sudden become humble. He became a man because he is, always has been, and always will be, *humble*. The incarnation didn’t lead to humility. Humility led to the incarnation. As Donald MacLeod puts it,

“(Christ’s) impulse to serve lies at the very heart of deity. God is not self-centred and self-absorbed. As love, he is pure altruism, looking not on (or at) his own things, but at the things of others…It is his very form to forego his rights.” (The Person of Christ, p. 215).

So when you are tempted to give up on your responsibilities, when you are tired of being faithful, remember the honour that awaits those who remain faithful. You will be honoured by Jesus himself as he serves you. He will favour you with the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” and then he will show you his favour by bending down and serving you.

The second reality is found in the second parable. Although this parable is primarily directed to church leaders, we can also apply its truths to every Christian. After all, every Christian is responsible for more than watching and waiting. Not all are called to preach and lead, but all are called to make disciples, share the gospel, be generous, care for fellow believers, pray, etc. and Jesus will hold us accountable, not just church leaders, but all of us, for how well we fulfilled these responsibilities.

Look at verse 43. As Jesus returns and discovers that his servant was faithful in all he was to do, he pronounces this blessing: “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 other words, he who is faithful with little in this lifetime will be entrusted with much in the next.

What does that mean? Popular culture likes to depict heaven as a place where people float around strumming little harps and seeming to have nothing to do. If that’s what heaven is like, it’s no surprise that so many people have zero desire to go there. It seems to be a meaningless and empty life that stretches on forever without end. But that’s not what heaven is going to be like.

Over and over again, the Bible teaches that heaven will be like the life we know now, except with all the sad parts removed. The book of Revelation, which spends more time on the subject of heaven and hell than any other book in the Bible, describes the end times as ushering in a “new heavens and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). Everything good that we experience now on earth, we will experience in the new earth. From the goodness of work, to the goodness of relationships, we will enjoy it all. The only difference will be that the curse of sin will be completely removed from our hearts, and from the rest of creation. We will work without toil, we will age without dying, we will eat without getting sick, we will enjoy relationships without sin, and best of all, we will worship God with pure minds and hearts, giving him the joyful, exuberant praise, glory, and honour that he deserves.

Verse 44 reminds us of this glorious reality that awaits us. If you are faithful with the responsibilities God has given you in this life, then God will give you greater responsibilities in heaven. God himself will assign tasks for you to do for his glory. Some of you will build cities. Others will create beautiful artwork and music. Some of you will plant gardens. Others will care for animals. People will create new recipes and study the created order as they mine the depths of God’s wisdom. The Bible even says that some of us will judge angels. There will be much to do, much to experience, and much to enjoy, and all of it will be done without the stain of sin for the glory of God.

So do you want to be entrusted with much in heaven? Then be faithful with what you’ve been entrusted with now. The hope of future responsibility is one of the realities that will keep the fires of faithfulness burning in our hearts so that we will finish this life well.

Now we get to the third reality. The first two realities are encouraging ones. They help us remain faithful by promising rewards for faithfulness. The third reality, however, is different. This one isn’t meant to encourage us about the rewards of faithfulness. Instead, it’s meant to warn us about the consequences of unfaithfulness.

Let’s look once more at the three unfaithful servants in verses 45-48. The first commits a grotesque abuse of his authority. Rather than feed and care for his fellow servants, he beats them and lives like a tyrant, eating, drinking, and getting drunk. What he has forgotten, however, is that his master is coming back, and when he does, he will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.

Jesus couldn’t be clearer. If you are unfaithful and abusive, you don’t belong to him. You’re not a Christian. You’re put out of his presence and placed with the unfaithful. Indeed, the word used for “unfaithful” can mean “unbelieving” in some contexts, and that certainly seems to be the case here. A true believer would never abuse their authority like this unfaithful servant. Every leader is going to make mistakes, but no one who is truly born again would act like this.

But notice the difference between this abusive servant and the last two servants. Both of the last two servants are disciplined, but neither is cast out. The phrase “cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful” in verse 46 doesn’t apply to the other two, even though both of them failed their responsibilities as well. One failed through laziness, and the other failed through ignorance, but neither of them are cast out of Jesus’ household.

Amazingly, this is where we find the gospel. You see, the last two servants didn’t deserve to remain in the master’s house. They deserved the same fate as the first servant. If the master of the house is the Holy God of justice, then any failure to do what he requires warrants eternal punishment. But that’s not what the last two servants receive. They are disciplined, yes, in proportion to their degree of responsibility, but they are not cast out. They are still part of God’s household.

This is good news for us, because every one of us has failed to be faithful. None of us has succeeded in doing the master’s will. He calls us to trust him, but we doubt. He calls us to love others, but we show them apathy. He commands us to be humble, but we are proud. What amazing mercy that God, the master of the household, shows to us, his unfaithful servants. It is a mercy made possible only because God’s one faithful servant, his only Son Jesus Christ, paid the penalty for our unfaithfulness by dying on the cross for our sins. And if we trust in him, believing that his death bought our forgiveness before God, then we will never be cast out of God’s household. Instead, we are adopted as the very children of God, and any discipline he gives will not be out of wrath, but out of love.

We don’t know what this discipline will look like in heaven. The Bible doesn’t tell us. The Apostle Paul talks about being saved “only as through fire” in 1 Corinthians 3:15, but he doesn’t tell us what exactly that means either. What we do know about it is that it will be fair. Jesus says in verse 48 that “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.” As a pastor, I will be held to a different standard than those who aren’t pastors. I have been given time and gifts to study the Bible and apply it to my life that not all of you have. Likewise, all of us, with the incredible resources that we have in terms of education and teaching, will be held to a different standard than the illiterate Christian living in a third world country.

As believers, we will face God’s judgment. It won’t be a judgment that determines our eternal destination, but it will, in some way, affect our eternal lives. Remembering this coming reality will be one of the many things that God uses in our lives to help us remain faithful.

(3) **THREE APPLICATIONS**

So how do we go about applying this to our lives? What does it look like practically to “stay dressed for action and keep our lamps burning” until Jesus returns? Let me suggest three simple applications.

The first is that we should regularly pray that Jesus would return. I have come to realize that the Bible instructs us to pray about a great many things, but most of us actually don’t spend much time praying for them. For example, Jesus instructed us to ask God to send out labourers into his harvest field in Luke 10, but how many of us do that faithfully? How many of us pray that God would raise up church planters, pastors, and evangelists from our church? How many of us pray that God would send faithful believers to share the gospel with our unbelieving friends and family? How many of us pray that the good news of Christ crucified for sinners would spread to unreached people around the world?

We may pray about a great many things, but if we’re not praying about what God wants us to pray about, we’re not being faithful. The same is true for Jesus’ coming. Prayers for Christ’s return are one of the most prominent prayers found in the New Testament. From the days of the early church, the cry of believers has been “Come, Lord Jesus!” We need to join that cry by regularly asking God to send his Son to definitively and completely establish his reign forever.

One way to do this is to create a system that will remind you to pray about the things you often to forget to pray about. I have personally created an acronym that prompts me to pray about things that God instructs me to pray for:

* S (pirit-filling)
* H (umility)
* A (we at my conversion)
* F (ear of God)
* T (hanksgiving for the church)
* S (end out labourers)
* ! (come Lord Jesus!)

Second, as leaders in the church, Tim, Brett, Cyril and I need to intentionally and regularly schedule opportunities in the life of our church that teach and celebrate the doctrine of Christ’s return. We are called to be faithful and wise managers of Jesus’ household, and one of the most important ways we do that is by feeding you the food of sound doctrine, including the doctrine of Christ’s return. That’s something that the four of us will be working on in the weeks to come.

Lastly, all of us would do well to spend intentional time assessing our faithfulness to our God-given responsibilities. Ask your spouse how he or she feels you’ve been doing in fulfilling your responsibilities in marriage. Ask your children to give you input on your parenting. Ask your friends to speak into your life regarding the holiness of your life. This will, no doubt, be a humbling exercise, but it’s one of the ways we stay dressed for action and keep our lamps burning. We assess our faithfulness now, so that when Jesus assesses our faithfulness when he returns, we will not be found lacking.