

Keep your lamp burning: eternity in focus

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Today, we're heading back into the Gospel of Luke and continuing our series we are calling *Keep your lamp burning*. We're right in the middle of an extended discourse of Jesus about the need to be ready and to stay alert when it comes to our faith. The first concern Jesus raised was the threat of persecution and tribulation because of our faith. When the pressure increases we're going to be tempted to be hypocritical or even walk away from Jesus. We also might be tempted to hoard our possessions thinking we can secure our life in our own power and strength; that was Jesus' second focus. He moved on from there and helped us process the worry and anxiety that's associated with stressful times. Even being anxious during difficult times falls short of how we should live because it's an act of faith in God's care of us. So, that's where we've been. Let's keep reading this teaching from Jesus to see where he takes us (READ Luke 12:35-40).

Our title for this series comes from this paragraph - "keep your lamps burning," Jesus says. It's his way of pleading with people to stay ready; to not let your guard down. The first phrase in vs. 35 gets at the same idea - stay dressed for action. That exact phrase beginning vs 35 is literally translated, "Let your loins stay girded." Men in first century Palestine would wear loose fitting clothing that would oftentimes get in the way of their legs while working or traveling (PIC). So, they would cinch of their garment like in this picture so they could be ready to work or travel - that's what it means to gird your loins. Spiritually speaking, Jesus is saying, be dressed and ready for work and action; make sure you lamps are lit in the darkness so you can respond quickly if something happens.

It's important to consider: what are we supposed to be spiritually ready for? Jesus is going through a whole lot of work trying to make sure his disciples are ready and that they don't give into the temptations of hypocrisy, apostasy, hoarding, anxiety when the hostilities increase, but what's the due date, if you will? What's the critical moment or event that we need to be ready for? Jesus tells us that in vs. 40; he says, "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." You *must* be ready; again, notice the urgency of it all. And what you need to be ready for is the coming of the Son of Man. The Son of Man is a reference to Jesus; it's Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself in the gospels. It comes from the Book of Daniel. And Jesus is saying, "Be ready for when I come again."

When Jesus talks about his own return, the coming of the Son of Man, he's talking about the inauguration of the New Age. When Jesus comes again some important events are going to take place. Evil will be defeated; the old order and way of life will end. Mourning, crying, pain, and death will be no more - what a glorious day it will be! But Jesus says something else is going to happen when he comes again. In fact, he's been hinting at throughout this whole section. Let's look for ourselves.

- The first hint is vs 5 - “But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has the authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” It’s obvious Jesus is trying to redirect his listeners fear; don’t fear the one who can only kill you. Fear him who can throw you into hell after you’ve died. And when would that take place? At the final judgment. When we stand before God and give an account, he will separate the sheep from the goats.
- Notice vs. 8-9: “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” Again, Jesus has the final judgment scene in mind, doesn’t he, as he teaches and encourages ongoing faithfulness? Stand firm! Don’t recant your faith because on the final day I will vouch for you before God with all the angels watching.
- When Jesus warns about the temptation to hoard, look at the moment of truth from vs. 20: “But God said to him [the man who stored up treasures on earth], ‘Fool! This very night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” What’s going to happen when you pass away from this life to the next? You will stand before God.
- Finally, as Jesus tries to help our anxious hearts he redirects us to focus on the things that really matter (vs. 33), “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.” When do you think you’ll get this *treasure in the heavens*? Again, after you pass from this life to the next.

This entire section, Jesus has been trying to draw his listeners attention to the coming reality that they will meet God. And that will happen when Jesus comes again. Whether we die or whether we are alive at the glorious return of Jesus, when he comes again he is bringing the final judgment with him.

Jesus is showing us in this passage that Christians are to always live their life with eternity in mind. This world that we see, that we touch, is not all there is. Your life, your existence is not only defined by the years you live on this earth; there is another life, another world or reality that is more important. It’s eternity. In fact, did you notice how Jesus shows that we get ourselves in spiritual trouble when we forget about eternity? When you forget about eternity and that you will meet God, you’ll care too much what other people will think and do - no, care mostly what God thinks because you’ll meet him in heaven. If you don’t remember eternity you’ll hoard and store up treasures on earth instead of working for treasures in heaven. Anxiety comes when you get your eyes off of eternity and put them on your worldly troubles and puny, worldly resources. So, get this: not only is it true that you can’t remain faithful in your journey with God (especially during difficult times) when you forget about eternity, but remembering eternity is actually your secret weapon against the temptations. God is actually trying to help you with the temptations when the trials hit you *by looking at eternity*. Keeping your eyes on eternity will keep you focused on what really matters; focusing on eternity will guard you against be swept away by worldly troubles and temptations.

I bet some of you have heard the phrase, “Too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” It’s a way of saying that when people focus are too preoccupied with heaven or with eternity they miss their opportunities to do good on earth, and, quite frankly, they get a little annoying, too! But I would argue the scriptures tell us the only way you can be of any earthly good is if you are heavenly minded. Having eternity in mind is what keeps us faithful to God, wise in our relationships, sacrificial in our service, and generous with our resources. To be any sort of faithful follower of Jesus, FBC, you have to think and live with eternity in mind.

The dominant illustration Jesus uses is this picture of the master/servant relationship. Our culture or society is a little too safe to appreciate all the details in this story. Most of us don’t keep our house and our property guarded behind a wall. But in many parts of the world they do need walls bordering their property to keep thieves out and their property secure. And, obviously, evening time is the most likely time for someone to come and try to steal your possessions. That’s why a servant would be waiting up at night for his master to come home from a party. The master himself is locked out; the walls are high and the gate is locked. The only way he can get in is if his servants are staying up late to let him in.

Imagine: you and a half dozen other servants are waiting for your master to come home. Your master and his wife are gone to attend a wedding. You’ve seen this before; your master loves to dance the night away with his wife at every wedding dance they go to. You never know when he’s going to come back; in fact, there’s been a few times when he doesn’t come back until the next day. So there you are with the others servants. Do you wait up for your master? It’s late; you started the day very early in the fields. You want to go to sleep. You think, “Maybe one of the other servants will stay up,” so you can just go and get some rest. Or maybe you should just leave the gate open so that the master can let himself in. What should you do?

This is kind of like the dilemma we face with our faith. We know that the Bible tells us to be ready for Jesus’ return; we all have heard the warnings. But come on; let’s get real. It’s been 2000 years since Jesus said, “I’m coming back.” You don’t really think, FBC, that he’s coming back today, do you? We’ve got some time. So, if you’re not quite as obedient or punctual or efficient like you would be if your master is here, that’s ok. You’ve got time.. It’s not like you’re going to meet Jesus this afternoon!

Jesus says that’s what lazy, unfaithful servants say and think. You don’t know when you’ll meet Jesus, do you? He might come in the 1st watch of the night, or maybe the 2nd. Or maybe he’ll come back in the third hour. You don’t really know. And you can’t just keep the gate unlocked. Didn’t you see the presence of the thief in vs. 39? Do you think your master will commend you if in your laziness you just left the gate open giving access to someone to rob your master?

Friends, don't delay in being obedient to Jesus. Don't wait until the last minute; it might just come upon you sooner than you think and then you'll be caught off guard and ill prepared for Jesus. That's the worst thing that can happen.

Hidden in this little parable is a reward that I'm hoping will persuade you even more to be ready for Jesus. It might seem that the principal motivation to be ready is the fear of being unprepared for the coming of Jesus. That motivates me. So, a way to articulate the reward might be: You will avoid disappointing Jesus and being punished by him if you stay ready. That's a good reward. Oh, but there's a better one.

Look at vs. 37; "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." So, go back to that imaginary scene I asked you to think about. You waited up for your master; it's 2 AM in the morning. It's been a long day and night. You're feet are sore; you're back aches. And you're pretty hungry. And you hear a little *beep, beep*. It's the car horn of your master; he's letting you know he needs you to open the gate. So, you run to the gate and you open it up for him so he can come in. He parks the car and after a few short pleasantries he says so you, "Hey, go into the dining room. You've worked hard for me all day. And then after your long day of work, you stayed up waiting for me. I'm so pleased with you. I want to serve you." You take your seat in the dining room and your master comes and brings to you the best of his wine, the best of his food, and serves you and your fellow workers who have stayed up late for him.

Did you see? Here's the real reward: the service, the care, the attention of your master. Think of such a gift! Your master doesn't owe you anything. You live in his house. You needed his help; he didn't need yours. He's the one with authority. But he's such a good master; he's so kind, so thoughtful, so committed to your good that he would humble himself and take the form of a servant to bless you, to work for you. That's our Savior, isn't it? That's Jesus. Sure, it's a gift that our master, Jesus, doesn't punish us for our failure to serve him well. But his reward goes far beyond that: he works for us. He serves us like he owes us something when we owe him. His love for us is so great that he treats us so much better than we deserve.

That's the image I want to leave with you this morning. This is the master who is telling you to be ready. He's so good. He has, he is, and he will work for you. For what you need and for what your heart longs for. You won't regret remaining faithful to him; you won't regret keeping your lamp burning so you are ready for his return.

Key Vs. Luke 12:37

Questions for the week

- What will happen when Jesus returns? What thoughts and emotions does that stir?
- What are the challenges of staying ready for Jesus' return?
- How will you think and act differently because of what you heard today?