

## “Preparation J” (Luke 12:35-48)

There is a bumper sticker and t-shirt slogan that says, “Jesus is coming, look busy.” The intention behind this slogan is humorous sarcasm. Yet, for disciples of Jesus, this slogan reminds us of an underlying and sobering truth: Jesus is coming back and we can either attempt to “look busy” or be found faithful.<sup>1</sup>

In Luke 12, Jesus has been challenging His disciples to be faithful stewards. Verses 1-12 have addressed the disciple’s stewardship of the gospel. The disciple must make good use of the gospel by boldly living and proclaiming it. Verses 13-34 have addressed the stewardship of possessions. Our preoccupation must not be with material things, but with true “life.” We need not worry about our life, but we should use things to minister to people’s needs now in order to lay up treasure for ourselves in heaven (12:33-34). In 12:35-48, Jesus turns to the stewardship of time. He will instruct us as how we are to view and use the time that remains until He comes.<sup>2</sup> His challenge for us is this: The time to prepare for tomorrow is today.

**1. Watch and wait until Christ returns (12:35-40).** In these six verses, Jesus uses four pictures to emphasize the same point: Be ready for His return. The opening phrase in 12:35, **“Be dressed in readiness”** or literally “let your loins be constantly girded.” In the first-century everyone wore long robes, which were a hindrance if you needed to move quickly or freely. People tucked the outer robe up into their belt to get it out of the way, allowing free movement. They were then ready for hard work, vigorous travel, and dangerous battle.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Jesus’ disciples have strenuous duties. Jesus told His disciples that they were to live on alert—watching and waiting for His return. Are you ready for action? Are your seat belts fastened?<sup>4</sup>

The second picture, **“keep your lamps lit,”** is found in 12:35b. That is, disciples must be on the constant watch, even in the midst of the darkness of the night.<sup>5</sup> This image shows someone’s readiness to move about during darkness. Remember, in Jesus’ day there was no electricity. There were no streetlights or city lights outside and no nightlights to help you find your way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. If you were expecting a midnight visitor, you would keep an oil light burning so that when he knocked on the door, you could see to let him in. The lamps (*luchnos*) referred to are small clay lamps. To keep them burning requires both an expenditure of effort and resources. Burning lamps must be refilled periodically with olive oil, the wicks must be trimmed occasionally, and they must be checked lest the wind were to blow one out.

One of my pet peeves is the failure of my family or me to turn off lights in our house. Being frugal, I hate to waste electricity. So whenever I see a light on in our home that doesn’t need to be on, I take it upon myself to turn the light off. Being a preacher, I typically proclaim, “Someone left the light on in the family room. We really need to be more careful.” I guess you could call me the energy scrooge. Fortunately, in Jesus’ kingdom, it is not “lights off,” but rather “lights on.” Until He comes, Jesus wants us to ensure that the lights will remain lit so that when He arrives the house is prepared for His entrance. Now isn’t the time to relax and conserve energy, but a time for renewed vigilance, renewed effort, and renewed investment of our energy as we prepare for Jesus’ coming.

The third picture is of slaves who are awaiting their master’s return from a wedding feast. Such feasts could last for days, often for a week.<sup>6</sup> The slaves would need to be ready when they heard their master arrive to open the door and serve him. In 12:36-38 Jesus says, **“Be like men who are waiting for their master<sup>7</sup> when he returns from the wedding feast,<sup>8</sup> so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks.<sup>9</sup> Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.”<sup>10</sup>**

Jesus tells His disciples that the master shouldn't have to bang on the door and wait while his slaves get up and come sleepily to the door, stumbling over things in the dark. When the master arrives, the slaves are to be ready, regardless of what time he appears.<sup>11</sup>

Whenever our family returns home, our basset hound, Jerome is waiting for us. The moment he sees our car, he begins to bark. Whenever we leave he barks and then he spends the rest of his day watching and waiting for us to return so that he can bark again. Jerome serves as a wonderful example of how we should expectantly be awaiting our Master's return.

This sounds so easy, doesn't it? Just be ready!<sup>12</sup> Yet, it is important for us to recognize that this is not as easy as it initially appears. In 12:37, Jesus uses a word that is rendered “**alert**” (*gregoreo*). This word means “to stay awake, be watchful, to be in constant readiness.” It comes from a word meaning “to wake or rouse up someone.” Have you ever tried to drive late at night and struggled to stay awake? I have. Perhaps the best thing to do is to stop and take a break. Get out of the car into the brisk air of night. Walk or run back and forth to get the blood circulating. Then when you begin to drive again, leave the window open so the air blasts into your face. Chew gum. Listen to the radio. Talk, pray, or sing out loud. Staying awake when you are weary is work. It is discipline. It requires diligence.<sup>13</sup> There are many distractions in our lives that can keep us from being ready. One of the greatest culprits is busyness. Are you too busy today? Are you out with people too many evenings and weekends? Are you working too many hours at the office or home? Do your interests keep you from having time to reflect on Jesus' coming?

Jesus tells His disciples that if they are ready for His arrival, they will be “blessed” or rewarded for their faithfulness. Jesus wants His disciples to understand that as “slaves” His coming is their most important priority. Therefore, their weariness and self-indulgence isn't to take over. They are slaves who are obligated to prepare for their Master's return. However, we must maintain a tension between duty and love. The word translated “waiting” (*prosdechomai*) means “to look forward to, ‘wait for.’” It has the connotation of “receive favorably,”<sup>14</sup> and thus is not just a dutiful waiting, but an anticipation of one who is hoped for, expected, and looked forward to. As disciples we are to love the appearing of Jesus (cf. 2 Tim 4:8). We are to long for it. If we serve Jesus in this way, He tells us that He will return the favor and serve us! While Jesus is a leader, and a demanding one, He is not aloof. He is the Servant Leader, from whom all of us learn to serve and take on a servant mentality. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah who pours out His life unto death and is numbered with the transgressors (Isa 52:13-53:12). He is the Humble Servant who washes the dirty feet (and souls) of His disciples (John 13:4-17). He is the Son of Man who does not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). While it is hard to imagine, even in eternity, Jesus Christ will serve His faithful slaves.

The fourth picture in 12:39 is of a thief breaking into a house in the middle of the night. If the homeowner had known when the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. He would have been ready and waiting. In this illustration Jesus compares His return to the coming of a thief. The point is that those whom He visited would not expect His return. This picture gives a warning whereas the previous one provided encouragement. The previous picture presented the possibility of delay, but the present one stresses sudden and unexpected arrival.<sup>15</sup> Jesus says, “**But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into.**” In biblical times, thieves would dig through the mud-brick wall of a house, ever so silently, to gain entrance at night, steal valuables, and then exit without waking the family. The only way to catch a thief trying to enter your house by digging through the wall is to stay awake so you can hear him. Let's face it; thieves don't schedule their robberies in advance...at least not the good thieves. Likewise, Jesus Himself will come like a thief. He will not write in the sky, “I am coming at midnight on December 31<sup>st</sup>.” Jesus won't do that because He knows that many of us would live however we'd like and then confess our sins at 11:59 on the eve of the New Year. He's smarter than that! He wants us to be ready at all times. In the same way, Jesus will come—unanticipated, unexpected.<sup>16</sup>

An important point worth making is that there are two sides to readiness: Christ *is* coming and Christ *will* come. There is both a spiritual and a physical coming. The second coming was an enigma to the disciples. They didn't understand that Jesus would come again. They were still expecting Him to exercise His power and glory and rule over the earth (cf. Acts 1:6). But Jesus wants His disciples to live in light of His comings. There are many little comings related to service. Jesus had come to His disciples many times to call them to service. If we don't respond faithfully to these constant comings, we will not respond well to His coming for us—the rapture.<sup>17</sup> Another way of putting it is: The best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is never to forget the presence of Christ.

In 12:40, Jesus closes this first section and states the application of all four pictures: **“You, too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.”** The word “readiness” or “ready” occurs in 12:35 and 40. It is the subject of this paragraph. Jesus, “the Son of Man,”<sup>18</sup> wants us to be ready because He is coming at a time we will not be expecting Him. Scoffers may say, “It's been almost 2,000 years since Jesus spoke these words. Every generation since then has thought that it was the final generation before His coming, but they all died without seeing it happen. Face reality—it's just not going to happen!” Yet, the Scriptures assure us that Jesus' return is certain (2 Pet 3:3-13). As a result, we must be prepared.

Are you ready to meet the Lord? I'm not talking about your salvation, but your service. Are there things you need to settle between you and the Lord, or between you and someone else? Are important things left undone, or are you looking expectantly for Jesus?

Jesus is clear: We are to watch and wait until He returns. But just in case we think that all Jesus expects is watching and waiting, in this next section He emphasizes working or faithfulness. Our generation shuns words like “duty” and “obligation.” Instead, we exalt ideas such as Maslow's “self-actualization.” But there is a very real sense in which our self-actualization as people will come to fruition in learning to be faithful, dutiful servants of Jesus. I know it runs across the grain of our somewhat selfish souls, but then Jesus' teachings often did grate on self-absorbed people.

**2. Work until Christ returns (12:41-48).** In 12:41, Peter asks the million-dollar question, **“Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?”** Peter is trying to figure out whether Jesus is speaking to the Twelve or the entire crowd. Peter was ready for warnings of sudden judgment for others, but he was surprised that Jesus seemed to be including the apostles as well! Jesus doesn't directly answer Peter's question.<sup>19</sup> Instead He shifts to a pair of parables about stewards charged with caring for slaves under them. It's as if Jesus indicates that these next two parables apply to the Twelve as church leaders, and then, by extension, to all those who have leadership responsibility in churches, which are known in the New Testament as the “household” of God (Eph 2:19).

In 12:42-44, Jesus answers Peter's question with a question and another parable: **“Who then is the faithful and sensible steward,<sup>20</sup> whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions.”** Please notice that Jesus changes metaphors and transitions from a “slave” to a “steward.” So the first question that we must answer is: What is a “steward?” A steward manages another person's resources. Nothing whatsoever belongs to him or her. As God's stewards we have been entrusted with time, talents, treasure, truth, and relationships.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, God expects us to invest these gifts wisely.

Imagine that your employer sends you to France for five years. You are given a lucrative salary and you have the opportunity to purchase anything your heart desires. There is only one catch: You can't take anything you buy home with you. Whatever you purchase in France must stay in France when you return to the States. However, during your sojourn in France, you do have the option of mailing money home.

Whatever money you mail home, you can keep for yourself and your family. In light of these realities, what kind of house would you buy? Would you even buy a house? What kind of car would you drive? What material possessions would you purchase? What entertainment and hobbies would you participate in? What would determine your course of action?

The allusion to the disciples who were chosen by Jesus for the purpose of caring for the spiritual welfare of the members of the household of faith is easily detectable in this illustration.<sup>22</sup> The issue is faithfulness and being given rule over others (Rev 2:26). When the master returns from a journey and finds that in his absence his steward has been doing what he was told to do without slacking off, the servant will be rewarded. The reward is a promotion. The verb “put in charge” (*kathisetmi*) in 12:44 was used in 12:42. But now the steward’s responsibility moves from just the servants to being over all the master’s possessions. The steward moves from being temporarily in charge to being permanently in control of all his possessions.<sup>23</sup>

In 12:45-46, Jesus presents a contrasting possibility: **“But if that slave [that same slave] says in his heart, ‘My master will be a long time in coming,’ and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers.”** These two verses are very difficult. Yet, what Jesus seems to be saying is that some of His leaders will grow weary of watching, waiting, and working. As a result, they will treat others poorly and they will live for pleasure.<sup>24</sup> The result will be that Jesus will return and find these slaves unprepared.<sup>25</sup> In this case, Jesus says He will cut such a slave in pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

I believe Jesus is speaking of suffering loss (cf. 1 Cor 3:15). The cutting in two is obviously figurative and does not suggest eternal condemnation. The figure refers to something that will cut a person deeply, to the core of his being. We know from other Scripture that the Word of God is like a two-edged sword that cuts to the division of soul and spirit (Heb 4:12). Jesus’ words, which are God’s words, will surely cut the unfaithful believer deeply—in two, so to speak. Furthermore, the phrase “the unbelievers” (*ton apiston*) can also be translated “the unfaithful.”<sup>26</sup> That, in my estimation, is a better translation because Jesus is speaking about “the faithful and sensible steward.” The issue is faithfulness, not faith.

There is such a thing as being “saved by fire” (1 Cor 3:15). Christians have to be just as ready as anyone else because although they do not need to fear eternal punishment and do not need to lack assurance of final salvation, yet loss of rewards and salvation “through fire” is still a fearful thing. It is a fearful thing for even Christians to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31).<sup>27</sup>

Jesus begins to bring His parable to a close in 12:47-48a: **“And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few.”** America is awash with the theory that corporal punishment of children is equal to child abuse. So the idea of beating anyone is repugnant. Let’s not judge Jesus’ words by 21<sup>st</sup> century values, but by standards of His time. Using rods to punish was extremely common. Fathers would discipline their children with a rod; masters would discipline their servants with a rod. Punishment of criminals would sometimes be with a rod or whip.<sup>28</sup> Discipline was not designed for cruelty, but for instruction.

Jesus disciplines those He loves and will punish those that reject Him. Some people by virtue of their greater knowledge, age, experience, and influence in the church will suffer far greater penalty for the same sin than an ignorant person will (cf. Jas 3:1).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it is critical that since we know His will, we obey it.

Jesus also says that ignorance is no excuse. God has given us many ways of knowing His will. When I was growing up, I attended a church that was weak in the pulpit. I was never challenged through the preaching of God's Word. I was relatively anemic in my faith. When I graduated from high school, I heard the preaching of Dr. Tony Evans out of Dallas, TX. I had never heard preaching like this in my entire life. I began to understand God's Word and even developed an insatiable passion for it. I remember crying out, "Lord, why didn't you place me in a church like Dr. Evans'?" I would have grown spiritually by leaps and bounds." The more I thought about this, the more frustrated I became. Then one day, the Lord spoke to me and said, "Son, I gave you My Word. What else did you need? You grew up in a home that had copies of My Word. You could have read it for yourself."

Jesus closes His parable with this convicting principle: **"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more"** (12:48b). The extent of their knowledge of their Master's will would affect their punishment (cf. Num 15:30; Deut 17:12; Ps 19:13). Privilege increases responsibility (cf. Rom 2:12-13; Jas 3:1). This fact should not discourage disciples from discovering God's will but should motivate us to maintain our faithfulness as we increase our knowledge. All of us as God's servants have a responsibility to know our Master's will as fully as we can, and as His servants to do His will.

You undoubtedly have tremendous gifts. God has given you a "much," and He wants you to use it wisely for His kingdom. The servant of Christ who has been faithful in his temporary, earthly responsibilities will be given permanent authority in the eternal state (cf. 19:15-17).

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### **Scripture Reading**

Luke 12:35-48

Mark 13:33-37

Matthew 24:45-51

Matthew 25:1-13

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Hebrews 6:10-12; 10:35

1 Peter 5:2-4

### **Study Questions**

1. Jesus urged His disciples to be prepared for His return (12:35-40). Am I “ready” for Jesus’ return? If not, what can I do *today* to ensure my preparation? Bonus question: How would I counsel a young person who said that he or she did not want to spend years preparing for Christian service because he or she thought that the Lord would return soon?
2. Stewards must be both faithful and sensible managers (12:42-43). How can I learn to be faithful? What is the process by which I can be restored in faithfulness if I have neglected it? How can a Christian discover his or her spiritual gift? Should every Christian be involved in ministry? Why or why not?
3. Jesus promises His disciples that faithful stewards will one day be rewarded (12:43-44). Does the promise of eternal rewards motivate me? Why or why not? How would I feel in eternity to discover that I had a saved soul and a wasted life? How would I feel if my life of service and faithfulness resulted in a rich kingdom experience?
4. In 12:42-48, Jesus speaks primarily to the disciples (i.e., future church leaders). Why are church leaders tempted to become petty masters rather than servants to their fellow servants (cf. 12:37)? If I am a church leader, how have I been guilty of abusing my leadership position? In what area of my ministry stewardship can I grow in my faithfulness to the Lord and those I serve?
5. Jesus’ words in 12:46 are troubling. Do I agree with Pastor Keith’s understanding of this verse? Why or why not? Should believers fear God’s judgment in any sense? If so, how? What Scriptures can I marshal in support of my view?
6. God has entrusted some stewards with “much” (12:47-48). Do I believe God has entrusted me with “little” or “much?” What can I be doing to maximize my potential as a productive steward in God’s household? If I believe I have been given much, what “more” do I think God is now asking of me?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The reason that I frequently speak the language of the end is so that we will know just how high the stakes are in the present.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Deffinbaugh, "The Way to Wait" (Luke 12:35-48): [http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=1112](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1112).

<sup>3</sup> See Exod 12:11; 1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 4:29; 9:1; Isa 59:17; Eph 6:14; and 1 Pet 1:13.

<sup>4</sup> I like the rendering of the New English Bible: "Be ready for action with belts fastened."

<sup>5</sup> W. Michaelis, "*luchnos*," TDNT 4:326.

<sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 355.

<sup>7</sup> The word translated "master" (*kurios*) refers to "one who is in charge by virtue of possession, 'owner.'" The word is also used as a term of respect, something like our "sir" for someone who is in a position of authority, "lord, master." It takes on divine connotations, however, because it is used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT to translate the Hebrew word Yahweh, the name of God. Thus, when Jesus is addressed as Lord, it isn't fully clear whether "sir" or "God" is meant. Certainly in the NT Epistles we see this exalted usage. But here in Luke 12:36, "master" refers to "owner," and only to Jesus by analogy.

<sup>8</sup> "Wedding feast" (*gamos*) is probably not an allegorical reference to the messianic banquet, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9; Luke 14:15). Rather the wedding banquet in our passage is just an element of the parable reflecting uncertain length; it indicates that the master is relatively close by and can return at any time. Let's resist the temptation to read more into it than is there.

<sup>9</sup> This picture of the master arriving at his home and knocking, seeking entrance, reminds one of Rev 3:20. See C. Marvin Pate, *Luke: Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 276.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 12:35-38 are only found in Luke's gospel. However, 12:41-46 appear to be parallel to Matt 24:43-51. Constable writes, "In the parable the master returns from a wedding feast. Perhaps Jesus had the heavenly marriage supper of Jesus with His bride, the church, in view (cf. Rev. 4-5). This event will precede His Second Coming to the earth (Rev. 19). Jesus was not referring to the messianic banquet since that will follow the Second Coming. The disciples in view are on earth, and Jesus is returning from heaven. Thus this parable is most directly applicable to disciples living on the earth during the Great Tribulation. It also teaches Christian disciples to be ready for the Lord's coming at the Rapture. Jesus could have returned as soon as seven years after His ascension, so the disciples who first heard Him speak these words also needed to be ready." 164.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars debate whether Luke is using a Roman or Jewish reckoning of the watches of the night, but the point is the same: The master could come in the middle of the night when you least expect him, so you must be ready.

<sup>12</sup> We must remember that Luke is recording what Jesus said to His disciples, who were Jewish, who were looking forward to the Messiah coming as King of His kingdom and fulfilling all the prophecies of the OT that spoke of the earthly kingdom. Even up until Acts 1:6 we read that they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" So these disciples would not have known about the rapture of the church. They would have been thinking of the Second Coming when Jesus will return in power and to establish His 1,000 kingdom. So why should we pay any attention to this if the interpretation is not to us? Because the application is: We too should be ready and anticipating the Lord's return not at the Second Coming, but at the rapture.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, "Watching for the Master, Waiting for the Thief" (Luke 12:35-40):

[http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/12\\_35-40.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/12_35-40.htm).

<sup>14</sup> BDAG, Electronic Ed.

<sup>15</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: CGT* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 538.

<sup>16</sup> The saying about "a thief in the night" is almost proverbial in the NT to describe the unannounced and unexpected coming of Jesus (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15).

<sup>17</sup> The context of Luke 12 reflects this idea of two comings. Jesus is speaking on earth and of temporal issues (e.g., priorities, money, cares, etc.).

<sup>18</sup> By using the title "Son of Man" Jesus may have been implying that the coming of the Son of Man that Daniel had predicted was in view (Dan. 7:13-14). That prophecy dealt with His coming in glory to rule. Elsewhere Jesus said He did not know the time of His return (Matt. 24:36). However, it would be unexpected because the exact day and hour were unknown, and His return would surprise many people (cf. Matt. 24:36, 42, 44; 25:13; Mark 13:32-33, 35). Constable

<sup>19</sup> Peter's question is posed only here in Luke, not in the parallels in Matthew and Mark.

<sup>20</sup> The noun "steward" (*oikonomos*) is modified by two adjectives. The first adjective is "faithful" (*pistos*) "pertaining to being worthy of belief or trust, 'trustworthy, faithful, dependable, inspiring trust/faith.'" The second adjective "sensible" (*phronimos*) "pertaining to understanding associated with insight and wisdom, 'sensible, thoughtful, prudent, wise.'"

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 243-252.

<sup>22</sup> Pate, *Luke*, 276.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 541.

<sup>24</sup> In Ezekiel 34, the Lord upbraids the shepherds of Israel because they dominated His flock and used them for their own purposes, just as those in Luke 12:45-46 were doing.

<sup>25</sup> The apostle John informs us that there will be believers who will be ashamed at Christ's coming (1 John 2:28).

<sup>26</sup> The RSV adopts this rendering.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Luke 12-24* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 2000), 21.

<sup>28</sup> See Deut 25:2-3; Ps 89:32, Prov 10:13; 13:24; 14:3; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15; and Heb 12:10-11.

<sup>29</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 2 That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 65.