

INTRODUCTION

There's a funny story about a lady who married a banker. He died and left her some money. She was looking for a little fun, so she married an actor, but he died a few years later. Then, she met a preacher and married him. She commented to a friend that if her current husband ever died that she was planning on marrying an undertaker next. Her friend, said, "You've been married to a banker, then an actor, and now a preacher. Why would you want to marry an undertaker?" She said, "Simple. One for the money; two for the show; three to get ready; and four to go!"

Jesus is coming back, and I'm here to tell you to *get ready!* When was a child, I enjoyed playing Hide 'n Seek. When I was "it" I'd close my eyes and count to a hundred really fast, skipping most of the numbers. "One two, three, four, twenty, forty, fifty, seventy, ninety eight, ninety nine, one hundred." Then I'd say, "READY OR NOT—HERE I COME!" Jesus Christ came to planet earth 2,000 years ago and He promised He would come again. Today's scripture announces: "Ready or not—Here He Comes!" But this isn't a game; it's a serious call for us to prepare for eternity. Jesus said,

"Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at which hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

Not all Christians agree on the sequence of the events of the Second Coming. Here's what I believe will happen (and men like Billy Graham, Stan Toussaint, and Chuck Swindoll agree). The next thing to happen on God's prophetic calendar will be the rapture of the church. Jesus will come back in the clouds and in the twinkling of an eye, all Christians will disappear to be with Christ. Those who are not saved will be left behind (thus the name of the popular series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.) Then there will be seven years of tribulation on the earth, and then Christ will return at the Battle of Armageddon, defeat the Antichrist and his forces. Then Jesus will set up a literal thousand-year kingdom on planet earth, based in Jerusalem. After the thousand years, there will be the Great White Throne Judgement described in Revelation 20. You don't have to agree with me about the sequence of these events, and I can still love you. You go your way and I'll go *His* way!

Don't get hung up on the details. Our main job is to be ready for His return. But people have always been more interested in trying to figure out *when* Jesus is going to return than being ready. In the 1980s NASA engineer Edgar Wisenhut used his mathematical skills to determine that Jesus would return in 1988. He wrote a book entitled, "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Take Place in 1988." He was so certain the rapture would happen on September 10, 1988, that he said, "If I'm wrong, then the scripture is mistaken." He was wrong, but there's nothing wrong with the scripture. Then in 1992, Harold Camping wrote a book entitled "1994" in which he

predicted Jesus would return in 1994. The next year, he wrote another book entitled, "Much More Evidence That 1994 Could Be the End of the World." Wrong again.

Who can forget the whole Y2K mania? Wrong again. Can you guess who made these statements?

- (1) "The last days are upon us. Weigh carefully the times." (Ignatius, 110 A.D.)
- (2) "There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born. Firmly established in his early years, he will, after reaching maturity, achieve supreme power." (Martin, 375 A.D.)
- (3) "We have reached the time of the white horse of the Apocalypse. This world will not last any longer ... than another hundred years." (Martin Luther, 1538)

So the fascination of setting dates is nothing new. But Jesus said in Matthew 24:36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Anytime you hear someone start setting a date, you know immediately that they are off track. As I've said before, when it comes to the Second Coming, I'm not on the scheduling committee, I'm on the welcoming committee! In our passage today, Jesus shares three mini-parables that teach us the importance of being ready for His return. You should:

I. JOYFULLY WATCH FOR THE BRIDEGROOM

In Bible times, Jewish weddings were wonderful celebrations. After a period of betrothal, the groom would sneak into the bride's house and try to slip away with her without anyone seeing him—it almost became a game. Then he would take her back to his father's house for a celebration. The wedding would include a great feast, much music, dancing and laughter. Our weddings are really somber and sad compared to a Jewish wedding.

In most of the New Testament we are seen as the Bride of Christ, the church. Jesus is coming to sneak away with us and take us to His Father's house. He said He was going to prepare a place for us, and that He would return to take us to be with him. (See John 14:1). In this parable however, we play the role of servants, so as you think about it, ask yourself a couple of questions:

1. Am I excited about Jesus' return?

In this parable, the bridegroom has slipped away to get his bride, and we must wait for him to return to the house. We don't know when he's coming back, so we must stay dressed up and keep our lamps burning so we can welcome him when he appears. For sure, the servants of the bridegroom would have been anxiously waiting and watching. They would be filled with joyous anticipation. Is that the way you feel about the Second Coming? Are you excited about it, or is it something that makes you afraid to think about?

There really is going to be a wedding feast in heaven—and it will be an experience of joy and celebration. John saw a glimpse of this future wedding celebration when he wrote in Revelation 19:7, 9: Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready ... (remember, the church is the bride) Blessed are those

who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” (that would be the Old Testament saints and the tribulation saints). But mainly notice it will be a time of rejoicing. It’s worth getting excited about.

Do you know what the last recorded words of Jesus are? Take a second and turn to the very last page of your Bible. That’s the book of revelation, not the book of concordance or the index, by the way. In Revelation 22:20 we read the last recorded words of Jesus: “Yes, I am coming soon.” Then notice how the Apostle John responded. He said, “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus.” Is that your attitude? Are you as excited as a servant at a wedding celebration as you await the return of your master, your friend? Your excitement level about the Second Coming will help you answer the second question:

2. Am I ready for Jesus to return?

If you aren’t very excited about the Second Coming, it may be you aren’t *ready* for Him to return. You may think you are ready, but are you really? Let me use an analogy you might understand. During some Monday nights in the fall, I turn on the television and I hear the wonderful song by Hank Williams Jr.: “Are you ready for some football?” I’m thinking, “Yeah, I’m ready for some football!” I’ve got my remote control, my A&W Root Beer and my peanuts: I’m ready! But am I really? I’m ready to *watch* football, but not to *play* football. Watching and playing isn’t the same thing. I used to play football and I know the difference. Being an armchair quarterback is the not the same thing as being a *real* quarterback. Oklahoma Coach Bud Wilkinson used to say football was a sport where 22 men who desperately need rest are on the field in front of 40,000 fans who desperately need exercise!

There’s a huge difference between being a spectator and a participant. Some of you listening today are basically Christian spectators. You just show up and watch the show. Or you tune in on your television and watch our program. Here’s the question: Are you ready for the Lord’s return? You may be think, “Yeah!” But if you are merely a spectator, you aren’t ready. Worship is not a spectator sport. There’s a difference between an armchair Christian or a pew chair Christian and a real participant. The next point will help you know if you are really ready. You should:

II. FAITHFULLY WORK FOR THE MASTER

In this parable, Jesus speaks about the servants being dressed for service. As a servant, we don’t work to earn our salvation, we work because we love our master. Here’s your next question:

1. Am I actively serving my Lord?

When Jesus returns will He find you hard at work, or will you be just be an armchair-quarterback-Christian? We need to clean up our Christian vocabulary. We have created a whole category of incorrect lingo about Christians. We tend to think the only “ministers” are the paid staff. In the New Testament, the word “minister” means “servant” and every Christian is to be a servant. So, every member of our church should be a minister. In my last church, we used to have a list of the ministers on our weekly mail-out. At the top of the list it said, “Ministers—every

Church member.” Then below that it said, “Pastor—David O. Dykes.” Are you a ministering for the Lord?

We have over 300 different ministries here, and the list is growing fast as members discover they are ministers and start new ministries to match their gifts. So, the next time someone in the community asks you how many ministers we have at Green Acres say, “Oh, around 2,000 or so, but we need many more!”

Most men laugh at the Ameritrade commercial on television where the lazy husband is reclining on the couch and his bossy wife tells him to do ONE thing that day—establish an online investment account. He says, “Sure.” Then he watches television and goes to sleep. He hears her car pull into the driveway and jumps up and runs to his computer. With a couple of clicks he’s signed up. He rushes back to the couch just as she enters. Her first question is, “Did you set up the account?” His indignant reply is “Of course!” Maybe you can wait for the last possible second to establish an online account, but you can’t act that way with God. You can’t wait for the last second and suddenly jump into some ministry. You won’t hear Jesus pull into the driveway: His return will be unexpected and in the twinkling of an eye!

Jesus is teaching there are some wonderful benefits to serving Him. One of my aunts sent me a needlepoint message once. It read, “Serving the Lord doesn’t pay very much but the retirement benefits are out of this world!” Jesus says in verse 43: “It will be GOOD for that servant whom the Master finds doing so when He returns.” (Luke 12:43) What will be so *good* about it? Jesus says in verse 37 that He will dress as a servant and serve them! I believe He’s speaking of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb we read about in Revelation 19. It’s exactly what Jesus did at the Last Supper. On the night before He was crucified, He took off his robe and took a servant’s towel and went around washing the disciple’s feet. Can you imagine the King of the Universe serving you? But that’s what Jesus said.

The words of a beautiful old hymn by Elizabeth Mills describe what we should be doing:

O land of rest for thee I sigh! When will the moment come
When I shall lay my armor by, And dwell at peace at home?
We’ll work till Jesus comes We’ll work till Jesus comes;
We’ll work till Jesus comes And we’ll be gathered home.

2. Am I patiently waiting for my Lord?

I admit: I’m not very good at waiting. I will drive out of my way to keep moving instead of waiting in a long line of cars. Our entire society doesn’t like to wait. That’s why we have fast food places. We buy things with credit cards because we don’t like to wait until we have the cash to pay for it. That’s why so many teenagers are having sex—they don’t have the discipline to follow God’s plan: Wait until you are married. We aren’t very good waiters.

Yet, in verse 38 Jesus said we need to keep on watching and waiting even if the return of the master doesn’t occur until the third or fourth watch of the night. The Romans divided the night into four watches of three hours each. The third watch ran from midnight to 3 a.m. and the fourth

watch was 3-6 a.m. That’s the time most people are sleeping, when they are least expecting something to happen...and that’s when Jesus will return. So the message is that we must wait *patiently* even if it seems like His return has been delayed.

Once a farmer was lying in bed and he listened and counted as his old grandfather clock began to chime the hours at midnight. Due to a malfunction, the clock struck thirteen times. He jumped to his feet and woke up his entire family saying, “Wake up! It’s later than it’s ever been before!” I’m not a date-setter, but I can tell you that it’s later than it’s ever been before, so we’d better wake up out of our spiritual slumber!

There have always been people who have laughed at the idea of Jesus returning. The Second Coming is rich material for Leno and Letterman. It’s nothing new. The Bible says in 2 Peter 3:3, 8: Scoffers will come in the last days saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? ... all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.” ... do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

To us, it may seem like 2,000 years since Jesus made His promise to return, but for the Lord it only seems like a couple of days. God’s sense of timing is so different than ours. That’s why we must wait patiently, actively, and expectantly. We must live each day as if He was going to return to planet earth today. Finally, you should:

III. LOVINGLY WARN YOUR NEIGHBORS

In verse 39 Jesus changes images. In the first image, Jesus is a loving master who returns and rewards His faithful servants. In the second, He is a dreaded thief who comes and takes away what the homeowner treasures. Why this drastic difference? To some, the return of Jesus will be a blessed event that is to be joyously anticipated. To others, the return of Christ will be a terrible, tragic event—like being ripped off. What will make the difference? *A relationship*. Servants have a personal relationship with their master, but a homeowner has no relationship with a burglar. Do you have a personal relationship with God? If so, you won’t fear His return, you’ll look forward to it with joy.

In Revelation 16:15 Jesus said, “Behold I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.” In Revelation, garments are used a symbol of righteousness. When we trust Christ, we put on His robe of righteousness and it’s the *only* thing that can cover up the shameful appearance of our sinful nature.

Have you ever been robbed? I remember that after my dad died, my mom lived all alone in Mobile. She worked as a nurse during the day. One day she returned from work and found that someone had broken into her home and stolen anything of value they could find. They stole my dad’s coin collection he had worked on for many years, and a few antique guns he collected. They took the television, stereo and anything else they thought they could fence. But they stole something much more valuable than stuff: they stole my mom’s sense of security. And that made me mad.

After my mom called me crying, I thought if I could have gotten my hands on whoever ripped her off, I probably wouldn't have acted much like a Christian. If you've been robbed you know the feeling of being violated. If I had known she was going to be robbed, I would have been waiting with a member of the Mobile Police Department by my side. If you knew a thief was coming to your home tonight, what would you do? If you knew a thief was coming to your neighbor's home tonight, what would you do?

When Jesus comes back to rapture the church, it will be sudden and secretive like a thief slipping into a home at night. If you are not a true believer Jesus will take away some precious people in your life and you will be left behind. Jesus said in Matthew 24 two men will be in a field, one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and the other left behind. Jesus said we must stay prepared for His return because He will come as a thief in the night. Ask yourself:

1. Am I telling others about Jesus?

If you knew a thief was targeting your neighborhood, you would talk to your neighbors and tell them to take precautions. Jesus told us He would return like a thief in the night, so we must lovingly warn our neighbors to take precautions and to be prepared for His appearance. The kindest thing you can do for your friends, family, and neighbors is to tell them that Jesus is coming back—and we don't know when.

There's a great little book entitled *Every Christian's Job*, which states it is the job of every Christian to share their faith. In the book there is a true story about a bank president who realized he had never shared his faith with several close associates. He called all of them and asked for an appointment. He told each of them it was very important meeting. He came in to each of their offices and said, “I need to apologize to you, because I have never shared with you concerning faith in Christ.” Several of his friends that day became Christians.

If I knew there was a time bomb set in this room and I didn't know when it would detonate, it would be my sacred duty to warn you about it and to tell you to take action immediately. If I knew about it and refused to warn you then I would be guilty of your causing your death. The same principle applies to warning others about the judgement to come.

Let me read to you from Ezekiel 33. “I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them a warning. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to warn him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.” (Ezekiel 33:7-9) Jesus IS going to return, and it's our sacred duty to warn them to prepare for it. Next ask yourself:

2. Could I face the Lord with confidence if He returned TODAY?

Now, you may think all you need to do is to be saved to be ready for the return of Jesus—and that's the most important thing to do. So, if you are here today and you don't know for sure that

you have eternal life, don't leave this place today before you talk to someone about your salvation.

But, most of you are Christians and if Jesus returned today could you face Him with confidence? In speaking to Christians about the return of Christ, John wrote: “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” (1 John 2:28) In *The Message* paraphrase, it states: “And now, children, stay with Christ. Live deeply in Christ. Then we'll be ready for Him when He appears, ready to receive Him with open arms, with no cause for red-faced guilt or lame excuses when He arrives.”

John wouldn't write this admonition unless the possibility existed Jesus could return and find some Christians ashamed. You'd be ashamed if you were hooked on some impure habit when Jesus returned. If you are abusing your body with nicotine, alcohol, or drugs ... how would you react if Jesus returned at the very moment you were lighting up, drinking down, or shooting up? Or you could be involved in some unholy activity. There may be a relationship with someone that you know is improper. Would you be confident if Jesus came back while you were in the middle of that deed? When teenagers ask me what behavior is acceptable on a date, my reply is, “Don't ever go anywhere or do anything that if Jesus came back at that moment, you'd be embarrassed.” That's good advice for adults, too. Perhaps you have some unfinished business. Maybe the Lord has led you to serve Him, or to speak to someone about Christ, and you keep putting it off. How would you react if Jesus returned before you had a chance to do finish the job He gave you?

If you knew for certain Jesus was returning at noon tomorrow, what would you do differently between now and then? What sins would you immediately confess and stop doing? What Christian would you go to and ask their forgiveness so that you could be reconciled with them? What people would you seek out and tell them about Jesus. That's the point of what Jesus is teaching here. Don't wait. Do it today. Live today as if it was your last day!

CONCLUSION

There is a Christian children's home in the mountains near London, Kentucky. I visited there when I was in seminary, and those are some of the most precious children I've ever met. These kids love Jesus. Several years before I was there, a preacher came and preached on the Second Coming of Jesus. These were children who had been abused and abandoned, and often were never adopted and taken to a new home. The preacher told them Jesus loved them, and was preparing a beautiful home for them. He told them that one day soon Jesus would be coming back in the clouds to take them to their heavenly home. He quoted the verse from Titus 2:13 that says, “Looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The children got so excited that during their school hours and play time they would rush to the windows and press their faces against the window just to look for Jesus to come and take them home.

The director of the home said that they couldn't keep the windows clean because the children were constantly leaving smudges on them as they look for Jesus to come. I saw the smudges on the windows myself. My friend, are you keeping the windowpanes of your heart smudged with

the expectation of Jesus’ coming back? Are you looking for Him? Are you longing for Him? Are you watching, are you working, are you warning? Like John can you say, “Amen, even so, come Lord Jesus!”

OUTLINE

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1. Am I excited about Jesus' return?

2. Am I ready for Jesus to return?

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready ... Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" *Revelation 19:7, 9*

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1. Am I actively servicing my Lord?

"It will be GOOD for that servant whom the Master finds doing so when He returns." *Luke 12:43*

2. Am I patiently waiting for my Lord?

Scoffers will come in the last days saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?" ... all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." ... do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. *2 Peter 3:3; 8*

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1. Am I telling others about Jesus?

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes