

Ready or Not, Here He Comes**Luke 12:35-48**

This week we begin a new sermon series, returning to the Gospel of Luke, to pick up where we left off last year. This series will take us through Luke 12-19. Time does not permit us to consider every passage in these chapters, so we will work through representative teachings from this section of the Gospel, sometimes including other passages on a similar theme from elsewhere in the same Gospel. This first text centers around three propositions related to the return of Christ:

- (1) Christ will certainly return,
- (2) the timing of his return is uncertain,
- (3) the purpose of his return is to evaluate and to compensate our service.

Day 1: Luke 12:35-48 We are all accountable

For many, this may be the biggest surprise in this passage. So often the contemporary evangelical gospel begins and ends with Christ's death to atone for sin, and the forgiveness available to all who put their faith in him. But while this may be the full extent of many gospels today, it was not the extent of Jesus' message. His gospel includes his atoning death and forgiveness for all who call on him; at the same time, it also calls us to follow and serve him. And, as here, his gospel reminds us that we are accountable for our service. We are not only extraordinarily privileged recipients of grace; we are also servants under obligation to our master.

Does your understanding of the gospel extend beyond receiving grace and forgiveness from God, to serving him? His gospel includes both parts; does yours? Are you currently serving him in some significant capacity? If not, what rationale do you use to convince yourself that this passage does not apply to you? More importantly, what explanation do you plan to give him when he returns and finds you loafing instead of working?

Day 2: Luke 12:35-38 The extraordinary reward for those who serve

These two verses gain force when read in conjunction with 17:7-10. There, Jesus notes ancient protocols for slaves and masters: "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" It was a harsh life for slaves: working all day in the

fields, then preparing dinner for the master, then serving dinner, and only then can they eat and relax. Despite all that, there is no reward; they have merely fulfilled their obligations.

In contrast, according to Luke 12:35-37, after receiving the extraordinary privilege of Christ's death for our sin, and after serving him in this life, when we 'come in from the fields', so to speak, he does not call us to prepare dinner, and to wait on him. Instead, he tucks his robe into his belt (the NIV 'fastens his belt' is not at all illuminating), and then *he* waits on *us*! Just as Luke 17:7-10 properly captures the role of ancient servants and masters, Luke 12:35-37 overturns that role.

Which is to say ... we do not serve Jesus out of obligation, or fear of censure at the end of time. Instead, we serve him out of gratitude for all that he has done for us. And we serve him because he is worthy. Beyond all that, we serve him because he takes such delight in us when we do, such delight that he will reciprocate by serving us when we meet him. To show appreciation, he will not only invite us to dinner, he will also wait on us. This is truly extraordinary, and something not to be missed. Assuming that you are presently serving Christ in some way, what motivates that service: obligation, fear of future accountability, gratitude for the cross, expectation of blessing, or other factors?

Day 3: Luke 12:39-40 The risk of loss

In yet another surprising twist, Jesus here compares himself to a thief! Of course, the point of the comparison is not that Jesus is dishonest ... but that the timing of his return is uncertain, and if we are ill-prepared, we will suffer serious loss.

If your house has ever been broken into, you can feel Jesus' point. If we got word that some thief would be breaking into our home at a particular time, we would be sure to have the police waiting for him. Unhappily, thieves do not typically send homeowners a memo to set up an appointment. Risking some potentially unfortunate associations in order to drive home his point, Jesus compares himself to that thief: he will come unannounced; if we are taken by surprise, we will suffer loss. If your home has ever been burgled, the experience likely left you with painful emotions of a sort that you would not generally want to associate with Jesus. But he himself builds on those painful associations. (Though we do well to note that in his voice, this is not a threat to scare us, but a warning to motivate us.)

So, if Jesus came back *right this moment*, would he take you by surprise and

find you unprepared? Would you suffer loss? Or would you be able to say: ‘I have been waiting for you; here are the accounts of how I have invested my life for your purposes’?

Day 4: Luke 12:41-43 Slaves and Managers

Luke uses an interesting narrative technique to continue developing the same point, while shifting its direction. Peter asks, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” His question signals a shift in application, from all Christians to spiritual leaders (not just the apostles, but also subsequent generations of elders, pastors, and deacons, etc.).

Two features of Jesus’ exposition are notable. First, even leaders who manage the church are no more than slaves: “Who then is the faithful and prudent *manager* whom his master will put in charge of his slaves? ... Blessed is that *slave* whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (12:42-43). As was common in first-century secular society, a slave overseer was himself often a slave. So in the church: whatever our leadership structure, we are all essentially equal, all slaves of God. Secondly, leadership is not a status to be envied, but a responsibility to be undertaken faithfully. God puts them ‘in charge of’ the church, and calls them to ‘work’.

If you are not in leadership, take a moment today to pray for our leaders, from elders, pastors, and deacons, to your small group leader, that they would devote their efforts to their task, and not to the elevation of their own status. If you are a leader, which is more prominent in your conception of this role: (a) the status, or (b) the task? Does your position serve your ego, or the needs of those whom you oversee? Are you faithful in the discharge of your responsibilities?

Day 5: Luke 12:43-46 Leaders are accountable: part one

Leaders, no less than other church members, are held accountable when the master returns. Those who serve faithfully are awarded greater responsibility and authority. Those who are abusive and exploitive fall under judgment. And a severe judgment it is: they are (metaphorically) chopped into pieces, and consigned to final judgment along with the unbelieving. Luke develops a pun here that English does not capture: ‘unfaithful’ and ‘unbelieving’ are the same word; ‘unfaithful’ leaders share the same outcome as ‘unbelievers’. What a great pity, to be a church leader or pastor, holding a position of respect and honor in this life, only to be consigned to judgment in the next.

This does not mean that leaders need to live in fear or apprehension about the coming judgment. The sins for which they are punished are obvious and

inexcusable. In the parable, the sins encompass abuse of subordinates, and extravagant self-indulgence. While Jesus does not provide literal equivalents, abusive treatment of church members and carelessness in the discharge of responsibilities are reasonable parallels.

If you are not in leadership, pray today for those who are, that they will discharge their responsibilities graciously and faithfully, so that they will not come into judgment. If you are in leadership, beware of using your position over others to satisfy your own ego or selfish needs.

Day 6: Luke 12:47-48 Leaders are accountable: part two

Jesus sketches a second and third way that leaders can fail. The first, considered yesterday, was by exercising leadership in ways which harm others. The second and third ways of failing both involve neglect, whether neglecting to prepare for the task, or neglecting to do it, or both. While the first of the three does harm, the latter two fail to do good.

These two forms of neglect differ in two respects: (a) degree of culpability, and (b) degree of punishment. The former knows what is required, but does nothing; the latter does not know what is required, and does nothing. Both have nothing to show for their efforts, but the former has less excuse than the latter. Consequently, while both are beaten for their negligence, the former receives a more severe beating.

Of course, this entire line of thought raises questions regarding the final judgment (or assessment). We typically think in terms of two – not four – outcomes: eternal life or eternal punishment. In 1 Corinthians 3:10-17, Paul extends these to three: salvation with reward, salvation by the skin of one's teeth, and condemnation. But here, Jesus (and Luke) goes one step further, with a gradation of punishments: light beating, severe beating, chopped into little pieces. There is a mystery here that we would love to solve. But ultimately, we do not need to know how a light beating differs from a severe beating, and what qualifies us for one or the other. Either way, a beating is still an unpleasant experience obviously to be avoided.

And both are avoided by faithfully serving Christ. We are accustomed to thinking of salvation in terms of 'grace without responsibility': God saves us, and we enjoy that. But Jesus teaches grace with responsibility. Let us serve him in such a way that we receive a reward rather than a beating.