

Be alert, ready, and faithful (Mat. 24.37-51)

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³⁷ As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark,³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. ⁴⁵ "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Introduction

The title that I have for Matthew 24.37-51(our text for today) is "Be alert, ready, and faithful." The question of verse 45 puts the text in perspective: **Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?** The question harkens back to the previous exhortations (24.37-44) and ahead to an exhortation that arises from it (24.45-51). "Then" (v. 45a) directs us back in thought as the question (of v. 45) points us ahead in thought (thus we have a threefold unit with each component an exhortation).

Jesus encourages wise and faithful waiting. He does this by exhortations based on what we do not know and on what we know as to the time of His coming. He does so also by promise and warning regarding service in light of these things.

Each point in the outline is therefore an exhortation based on the time of the Lord's coming as imminent good news that is certain and sure.

1A. Stay awake (be alert; remain alert; be watchful)

There is much more here beyond the idea of staying awake in church during the sermon. However, being rested and alert for the Sunday morning sermon is surely an important element within a much larger responsibility of staying alert, awake, and watchful. Similarly, when the disciples literally fell asleep in Gethsemane (Mat. 26.40), the Lord's exhortation to stay awake includes but goes far beyond literal sleeping in His presence (Mat. 26.41, to avoid temptation).

Jesus grounds the first exhortation in two fundamental facts that we should absorb, know, and weigh about what will happen when Jesus returns.

1B. First, the world will be caught unaware

³⁷ As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark,³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (24.37-39).

Jesus compares His coming to the flood that came in the days of Noah. He draws a parallel between the conduct of the people of Noah's day and the conduct of people at the time of His return. At the time of the flood, people went about their business as usual: they ate and drank; they married and gave their children away in marriage. They did so right up to the point in time when Noah entered the ark. Of course, there is nothing wrong with food, drink, and

marriage. The wrong was the mindset, the outlook, and the attitude of Noah's contemporaries regarding the word of God that announced the impending judgment. The wrong was the preoccupation of these people with their daily lives in total disregard of God's word preached by Noah.

Accordingly, Jesus summarizes the story in three powerful words: **they were unaware** (v. 39). They were in the dark as to the impending judgment right up to the very moment when it fell on them by surprise, and with dread-filled consequences. Thus, Jesus tells us that His coming will fall on the world in a similar way. For emphasis, He repeats the point at the beginning (v. 37) and at the end (v. 39): **so will be the coming of the Son of Man**. The world will be going about its business as usual. People will grope about in the dark unaware of the impending judgment right up to the point that it sweeps them away like a massive flood sweeps away everything in its path.

2B. The human family will be separated

⁴⁰ **Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left.** ⁴¹ **Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.**

If the dreadful experience of drowning in a flood does not get our attention, the next point should get it. The Lord speaks of the coming separation that will cut across the entire human family in language that indicates the weighty contrast between election and reprobation. This contrast surfaces here in two ways: per the text and per the context.

1) Per the text

Jesus talks about two men and two women as representatives of people in general. Again, daily life unfolds in the regular and ordinary way. Two men will be working in the field and two women will be working at the mill. Suddenly, the separation occurs. There is repetition again for emphasis: **one will be taken and one left** (vs. 40 and 41). No doubt this account reminds you of the parable of the wheat and the weeds, which speaks of a mixture of people until the harvest at the end of the world. In both the parable of the wheat and weeds and in the parable of the fish net, there is a grand separation at the end of the age.

Granted, it is good to compare these parables with our text, but there is more to consider. There is a powerful indication of the biblical doctrine of election and reprobation in the contrast here between "taken" and "left." The dreadful judgment of an overwhelming flood does not contain what we have in the single word, left. That is the doctrine of reprobation in a nutshell. To be left behind, to be left alone to your own devices, that is the most dreadful judgment of all. The most fearful thing of all is to have what we want, to have our independence from God, and to have our "freedom" from God so we can do what we please. When the Lord leaves someone, when He leaves them to their own way, then they are left behind to receive the just punishment of their sins. What a sobering picture: to be left.

2) Per the context

The context confirms this movement in thought to election and reprobation in the trumpet vision that the Lord spoke about earlier: **And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other** (24.31).

Recall that the trumpet call in the vision pictures the whole time between the Lord's resurrection and return as the gathering of His elect from the nations (from those who are not God's people). The picture concerns the contemporary generation that remains to the end, as the gospel goes to the nations in the land of Israel that represents the entire earth. The process of election and reprobation will come to its culmination at the coming of Christ when He separates between men and between women throughout the human family.

Thus, the exhortation is "knowing some things, do something."

You are to know, reflect on, and absorb the fact that the world will be caught unaware and swept away as it was caught unaware and swept away in the days of Noah.

You are to know that daily affairs will be status quo in the mixture of believers and unbelievers (both are in the kingdom, Mat. 13.38) *now before* any separation; *then suddenly* the Lord will come and separate two men in the field and two women at the mill to finalize the process of election and reprobation.

What are you to do? He says, “Stay awake.” This means that you are to have a mindset of looking upward to the coming of Christ to love His appearing being mindful of His return (having the mind so filled). In particular, you remain mindful by carefully weighing these two facts: people in general will be caught unaware and swept away in the flood of judgment to be left to the just deserts of their sins, and God will gather His people to the redemption of the body and resurrection glory.

Thus, do not be like the world in your outlook, but weigh carefully the great separation that is coming. Therefore, stay awake and watch for the coming of the Lord.

2A. Be ready

Hand in hand with staying awake is being prepared.

Be prepared for His coming, Jesus says, with the kind of preparedness that a householder would take in relation to a coming thief. ⁴³ **But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.** ⁴⁴ **Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.** (24.43-44).

If he knew the time of the thief’s entrance, then the homeowner would wait, watch, and not let the scoundrel pillage his home. Of course, homeowners do not know the time of night that the thief may come to do his dirty work. We need to think of the circumstance that Jesus implies here: that we do not know the time a thief will come, as we do not know the time of His coming. Thus, we can work with the illustration in this way. If the signs were in place and a homeowner knew that the thief’s arrival could be at any time of night, then he would wait and watch for him to avoid the damage that would otherwise result. The point of the story seems to be that if we know that the thief is coming (for sure, the signs all point to it), but we do not know exactly when it will be, then we will be on our toes waiting for him, and we would be able to prevent him from stealing away with our goods. Likewise, if we know that Jesus is coming for sure, but we do not know the precise day or hour, then we will be on our toes waiting for Him.

What might we draw from the idea of being ready to catch a thief?

It is not that we will catch the Lord, catch Him off guard and prevent Him from doing what He comes to do. Everything hinges on a sense of urgency, knowing that the coming in view is certain even though the exact time is unknown. Unless you are prepared and remain prepared, awake (24.42) and ready (24.44), His coming will overtake you as an uncomfortable surprise.

3A. Be faithful

Jesus presents this exhortation by means of a question.

Who is wise and faithful?

There is some difficulty in the grammar of this text. The grammar could indicate that it is the wise and faithful to whom a master will give a stewardship. That is how Ridderbos interprets this passage. He thinks that the other alternative (as a call to self-examination) does not fit with the latter half of v. 45, which speaks of the servants as those **whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time**. On further reflection, it is hard to see the point that Ridderbos makes because the entire section outlines the wisdom and faithfulness in view, namely, that of a servant discharging his duties to his master’s other servants. This easily pictures the duty each disciple of Christ has to all other disciples in a general way; thus, we all

have a calling to fulfill in the time between, as we wait, to be faithful in doing our work whatever it may be, small or great.

Notably, Jesus presents a scenario in which the master of a house puts a servant in charge of all other servants in his household. His basic duty is to care for the other servants. That is a basic, core, essential, and important duty, namely, that each servant (disciple) of Christ is the servant to every other servant (disciple) of Christ. The householder, the master of the house, goes on a journey leaving the servant in charge, leaving him with an important stewardship to fulfill. Jesus sets things in bold relief by asking a question, **who then is the faithful and wise servant...?**

We are to be mindful of His coming (looking at the signs correctly; focusing on His appearing, loving His appearing) and we are to be dutiful in the way of His commandments in light of His coming: **Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes (24.46).** Surely, being a “so doer” locks us into the fundamental commands like those of the Sermon on the Mount. Faithful doing is the way of wisdom.

Concluding implications

1) Wisdom versus folly

You are wise if you heed these exhortations. You are foolish if you do not heed them. With fear and awe, do not be unwise like the hypocrites (**with the hypocrites, 24.51**).

At the end of this section, the Lord expands on the contrasting destinies of the wise and foolish with regard to the grand events that hang over us with both threat and promise. There is the threat of severe judgment like has no match throughout history. It is the great tribulation. ⁴⁸ **But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (24.48-51).**

Thankfully, there is also the promise that the servant will have charge over all his master's possessions: . ⁴⁵ **"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes (24.45-46).** I do not know what this all means. Surely, it refers to our inheritance in Christ and to the fact that we are joint-heirs with Him (Rom. 8.16-17). That is beyond computation. Without question, the Lord has not told us half of what He has in store for His family.

2) The ordinary versus the extraordinary

You are wise if you attend to the basics of the Christian life in ordinary faithfulness. Attend to preaching, reading, prayer, giving, sacraments, and singing—faithful in the basics. It seems ordinary but it is vital; faithfulness is extraordinary (cf. the saying, “sow a thought and reap an action, sow an action and reap a habit, sow a habit and reap a character, and sow a character and reap a destiny”).

Everything hinges on faithfulness. This is not like the person that told me they chose to receive baptism by immersion because they wanted to make a big splash! It is not a matter of a big splash here and a great affect there—how to be effective as a Christian, how to have success—how to make a big splash! It is about humility like Christ who does not know the day or hour. It is taking on His outlook and humility. It is looking to Him in all things.

It is being awake, ready, and faithful by working hard striving after holiness. You are wise if you are diligent in the painful work of self-discipline and church self-discipline. As they say, “No pain no gain.” What does that mean? It means that we must stretch ourselves in the way of righteousness, by hearty exercise (so Hebrews 5.12-14). That involves training, developing good habits of righteous living in the basics of attendance to preaching, reading of Scripture, singing, giving, prayer, and participation in the sacraments.

Let me exhort you to the basic of reflection on the Scriptures everyday, as Psalm 1 expresses it: Blessed is the man or woman who meditates on the word and law of God day and night. How can you do this without being a pastor or theologian? Here is a simple way that is ordinary: either at night to end the day or early in the morning to begin the day, focus your thoughts on a text and start asking questions about it. Put a copy of the Scripture in your pocket and at different times through the day, ask yourself, “What does the writer mean? What does the Lord have for me here? Turn to the Lord at different times and say, “What do you mean by this word?” Furthermore, and this is very important, talk to someone about the text. It might be the text of the previous sermon or something from Sunday school. Thus, you can talk to your spouse about some angle you are wondering about; you do not have to have all the answers; you simply need questions to get the ball rolling. You can email your pastor or someone else in the church and share a thought. You can ask someone a question for input to your thinking. If a day goes by and you do not do meditate on the word, then you will begin to dry up. If you go all week, then you will get less from the reading and preaching on Sunday; it will be like a plant that when dried out, watering just goes right through the pot. You have to put the pot into a bucket of water and give it a good long soaking to get it back to go, to a good starting point. Follow Paul’s injunction to think on the word of God in light of the coming of Christ.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3.20-21).

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me- practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4.8-9).

Think of this as the apostle’s way of calling you to be alert, ready, and faithful: think and practice, think the word and practice it faithfully. Do so knowing that your citizenship is in heaven and not on this earth. Here you are a pilgrim. Here you wait for the Savior.

To the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ be all glory, honor, and praise, in what we think and how we live, amen.