

Luke 12:35-53: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 12 verses 35 to 53 Stay dressed for action, and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. 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. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Peter said, Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all? And the Lord said, Who then is the faithful and wise manager whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, My master is delayed in coming, and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant 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 put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not get ready, or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished. Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. In the latter half of Luke 12, Jesus is bracing his disciples for coming judgment. They must be dressed for action. Lamps must be burning. They must be waiting for the master to come. Perhaps we should see Passover themes here. A meal at night, dressed and ready for action. It's also similar to material that we find in Matthew chapter 24 and 25 in the Olivet Discourse, the ten virgins with the lamps, for instance. Faithful servants must be braced and ready for their master to return. And the faithful servant will be served by the master. This is a startling image, something which Luke underlines for his readers just a few chapters later. In chapter 17 verses 7 to 10, will any of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, come at once and recline at table? Will he not rather say to him, prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, we are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty.

So here the master serving his servants subverts the relationship as commonly expressed completely. There's a subtle mixing of metaphors here. Jesus is like the returning master of the house, whose coming is expected, although the time of it is unknown. However, the son of man is also compared to a thief. People don't expect the thief, but they need to be prepared for him.

A thief strips the unprepared of their property. And this ties in very much with the themes of the preceding section. Like the rich fool whose life and all its possessions were taken away from him by death. So the servants must be alert lest they lose all the contents of their house to the coming of the son of man. To faithful disciples, Jesus' coming will be like that of a returning good master.

To the unfaithful, his coming will be like that of a thief. How do you prepare for the coming of the son of man as a thief? You build up your treasure in the heavens, where thief cannot approach and moth cannot destroy. Peter then asks Jesus whether he's addressing the wider group or his close disciples.

[4 : 38] And Jesus goes on to tell a version of the earlier parable with three different developments. Now the focus is not on the servants more generally, but on the servant placed over other servants, the appointed steward. This is very much the role of the apostles and the shepherds of the church.

They will have to face a severer judgment for any unfaithfulness that they show. Throughout his ministry, Jesus challenges the leaders of Israel with a force that he does not challenge the crowds with. The appointed stewards over his house will face a similarly severe judgment if they are unfaithful. Faithful stewards will be given much greater responsibility.

The unfaithful will be judged most severely. And ignorant stewards will receive punishment, but of a lesser form. Judgment becomes a much more prominent theme in Jesus' teaching as he moves towards Jerusalem. Here he stresses that his purpose is to bring judgment upon the earth.

That is why he has come. This section harkens back to the teaching of John the Baptist in Luke chapter 3 verses 16 to 17. John answered them all saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming. The strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. John had previously wondered about the nature of Jesus' ministry in chapter 7, presumably because it didn't show the fire that he was expecting. But Jesus here teaches that the fire is on its way. The judgment is associated with the baptism of Jesus' own death, after which fire will be cast on the earth and division that is already beginning will become most pronounced. Jesus' description of his death as a baptism is quite remarkable. In many ways we could tell the story of Christ as the story of three baptisms. The story of the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, the baptism of his death, and his baptism of the church at Pentecost. The coming crisis will cut right through family relations.

People can often try to ground family values within the gospel, and in many ways the gospel does affirm such values. However, such values will never be completely underwritten by the kingdom. While families can be made new in the kingdom, the family must be subjected to a greater master, and the claims of Christ will cause division within many previously close-knit households. Indeed, we see at various points in the gospels that it caused such division in Jesus' own family.

[7 : 12] A question to consider. In what way was Jesus' death like a baptism?