



Catalog No. 928

Luke 12:35-48

Fourth Message

John Hanneman

July 25, 1993

LEARNING TO BE WATCHFUL

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

As a boy growing up in the Midwest I did a lot of hunting with my father. On brisk fall mornings we would tramp the fields and the corn rows together, seeking the elusive pheasant. At first I carried a BB gun. Next I got a little 4-10 single shot shotgun, and at last graduated to a 20-gauge with a three-shell clip. We kept our guns on safety as we walked the rows, glancing all around for the slightest movement. We practiced keeping our senses finely tuned. I worked at remaining focused by imagining that a bird was going to take flight at any second. My fingers were ready to instantly switch the gun from safety to fire. I trained myself to aim and shoot rapidly, but not too hastily lest I had not taken adequate time to aim or had not taken the proper precaution to make sure I was going to fire on a rooster and not a hen. No matter how many corn rows I walked, however, or how much I tried to be ready, the swish of a pheasant taking flight always startled me. Pheasants can huddle and hide in the smallest places. It's impossible to see them on the ground unless they are running. And when they take flight, the noise is so loud it almost scares you to death, especially if they get up from right under your feet. You try to stay alert and ready, but it is difficult.

Pheasant hunting demands that a skill called watchfulness be learned. My father was a master at this. As we drove down country roads looking for good places to hunt he would watch the ditches along the side of the road. How many times my heart began to pound as I watched him suddenly brake and heard him say, "Oh, oh! I think I just saw something." He had an uncanny ability to see a tiny pheasant head pop up out of the weeds. His hunter's watchfulness was amazing.

In this series on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke we have joined with our Lord and the disciples as they wandered together through Samaria. Samaria, as we have already seen, was a place in between home and destination, a place that was not comfortable, but this was where Jesus chose to train the disciples about a way of being, about the Kingdom of God itself. His method was not his usual teaching or preaching, however. He spoke to them in parables, the language of the Holy Spirit.

One of the lessons he taught them concerned the spirituality of watchfulness, of readiness. This is a skill we sorely need to learn today. Just as a hunter must learn watchfulness and preparedness, so too Christians must learn to be watchful and ready. People are mired in minutia. Weighed down with anxieties, we tend to become perplexed by the confusion and disorder we see prevalent around us in our modern age. Our senses have become dulled, and as a result we cannot see, hear, or think properly. But we need to be watchful, ready for the coming of Christ, for the entrance of God into our daily routine. This is what we will learn today from Jesus' insightful words, uttered long ago in Samaria.

Our text is taken from Luke 12:35-48:

"Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight. And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from

the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at 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. And 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. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

And Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, 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. But if that 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. And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." (Luke 12:35-48 NASB)

Technically speaking, this story is not really a parable, although Peter refers to it as such in verse 41. These verses actually form a cluster of parabolic allusions. While a parable usually is self-contained, here Jesus uttered three fragments of parables.

The first story concerns a landowner who returned from a wedding feast in the middle of the night. Arriving at his door he found it locked to keep out robbers, and his men waiting to open it for him. Jesus commented, "Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at table, and will come up and wait on them" (v. 37). I find the master's delight in the scene that greeted him understandable. Whenever my wife and I go out, I always make a point to first investigate the kitchen when we return home. Depending on whether the children have left it a mess or in immaculate condition, I respond with either delight or disapproval.

The second story speaks of a home that was burglarized. If the owner had known when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and alert and thus wouldn't have been robbed and suffered loss. The story parallels the believer's being awake and alert to welcome the Son of Man (v. 40).

The third story concerns a steward who was left in charge, responsible for the care of others, during his master's absence. This is a commentary on a slave doing what he was supposed to do as opposed to a slave not doing his master's will. Verses 46-47 detail the disobedient slave's punishment, while verse 48 gives the principle behind the parable. The first story therefore is positive; the second story is negative; and the third story is both positive and negative.

Notice in all three stories the repeated themes of awaiting an arrival and the timing of the arrival. Someone was coming, someone was expected. The implication is that God was coming: the living Lord was about to make an entrance into someone's daily routine. As to the element of time, the arrival was unscheduled and unannounced. For the believer, discipleship has to do not so much with the past, but with the future, the next thing God is going to do. But this is invariably unpredictable, isn't it? Most of us aren't watching or ready for God to enter into our routines. Thus we are taken by surprise when he invades, just as the homeowner was taken by surprise by the robber.

Peter's question to the Lord comes between the second and third story fragments. His query, "Lord, are you addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" has the effect of raising the stakes. Every time Peter asks a question, our suspicions should be heightened. Here he was seeking to evade something. He was assuming, or he wanted to assume, that this parable was not directed at him. He wanted to sit this one out. But Jesus told Peter that he himself was responsible: watchfulness cannot be delegated. This warning does not concern a spiritual gift that one may or may not have; rather it applies to every Christian. Watchfulness and mindfulness imply readiness for spiritual invasion.

The theme of the second coming of Christ is obvious here, but the text isn't merely dealing with future things. It is dealing with the present, with the entrance of God into our lives right now. For two thousand years, the first coming was anticipated and announced. In Samaria, Jesus was now present in person, although many times earlier he had invaded people's lives. Many therefore entered into the reality before the actual event occurred because they were alert, watchful and ready.

The second coming, of course, is yet future. The new heavens and the new earth, the revelation of the sons of God, the kingdom of God in all its glory and fulfillment lie yet ahead. But there is what we could call a "present coming": the future, in a manner of speaking, is already here. We don't have to wait for heaven to get to heaven. Just as people were alert to the coming of God prior to our Lord's first coming, so we are to be alert to his unscheduled arrivals every day, in the midst of the mundane and the trite. The thing to be learned is, we won't recognize his second coming unless we are watchful and ready in the ordinary course of events.

How can we acquire this skill of watchfulness? I will list four things that I hope will be helpful in this regard. First, watchfulness must be practiced in the common, everyday circumstances. Notice that all three stories have to do with the workplace. They involve community and relationships. The characters themselves were servants and slaves. The stories have to do with the home; they take place around the daily activities—sleeping, eating, washing the dishes, the daily responsibilities. Jesus did not set his parables around weekend retreats in Mt. Hermon, around planned times for ministry or arranged celebrations. God certainly enters into such activities, but Jesus was talking about something much more basic and routine.

Watchfulness, said Jesus, is necessary in our daily work, in the ordinary affairs of life. He wants his followers to be watchful in these settings too. When we are dressed up for an event, or when we are relaxed following the day, it is then we tend to anticipate that something "spiritual" may well happen. But life "happens" when we are in the midst of routine and daily grind. Furthermore, watchfulness does not take our energies away from daily life. It has to do with being alert during our daily routine. We might be thinking humdrum, but God is thinking glory.

When I worked as an engineer, most of my work weeks included at least one crisis: a fellow-worker out of sorts, a rumor about a change in management, etc. It was easy to be consumed with these things, to become emotional and fret about them. But I discovered something remarkable at work. In the midst of all the busyness and rumor, the hustle and bustle, the routine and the mundane, there were opportunities to experience God's arrival. I had opportunity to talk with a fellow-worker about his marriage problems, with someone who had read a Christian article I had left lying around, with someone who wanted prayer. When I began to recognize that God was knocking at the door at unexpected and unannounced times, then work became much more adventuresome.

This is what Jesus is talking about here—being watchful for some slight movement, becoming aware of an opportunity to speak a word of comfort. Through these things God comes to serve us and to encourage our own hearts.

There is a second thing here: Watchfulness is designed to take the place of worry in our lives. There is a striking contrast between anxiety (the subject of the previous text, verses 22-34) and watchfulness (35-48). Verses 22-34 deal about rest and trust. Jesus counseled his disciples to not be anxious about life, what they would eat or drink, or the body, what they should put on, etc. But lest we be tempted to sit back and relax, verse 35 comes as a jarring surprise: "be dressed in readiness and keep your lamps alight," said Jesus. Girding the loins in readiness and keeping lamps alight certainly contrast a life of ease and trust.

Verse 35 would have conjured up several OT images in the minds of the disciples. To be "dressed in readiness" literally means to gird the loins in preparation for action or activity. An interesting reference to this command is given in Exodus concerning the eating of the Passover lamb: "Now you shall eat it in this manner with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Lord's Passover" (Exod 12:11). Israel was to eat the Passover dressed in readiness, prepared to move out, because they were going to a new land. There was no time to be settled, no time to gather possessions or get comfortable, because their focus was on a future glory.

Likewise, the burning lamp would recall to the disciples the words of Leviticus 24: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command the sons of Israel that they bring to you clear oil from beaten olives for the light, to make a lamp burn continually. Outside the veil of testimony in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall keep it in order from evening to morning before the Lord continually; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations'" (Lev 24:1-4). They feared the darkness, but the presence of a burning lamp would symbolize abundant life, joy and peace. Extinguishing the lamp pictured death, utter gloom and desolation. The oil of the lamp, which represented the Spirit of God, was to burn continuously, i.e. symbolizing their need to be constantly Spirit-filled. The lamp of the wicked would

go out because it lacked the true life-giving illumination of God; it lacked the Spirit of God.

Worry enters when we tie ourselves to this life. It attacks when we begin building in the kingdom of earth, when we try to live comfortably in the flesh, when we want to remain in Egypt. Watchfulness and readiness, on the other hand, are tied to looking forward to a new kingdom, when our lives are illuminated by the Spirit of God. Freedom from anxiety does not mean we can be passive. We are still enjoined to be active and watchful, ready to respond when called upon—but we are to be ready for the right things.

Anxiety is a spiritual virus that drains and inhibits us. It can look like watchfulness, but when we are anxious we are merely thinking about ourselves. Anxiety narrows our perceptions to puny concerns. It can be clothed in spiritual garments, but it is the enemy of spirituality and watchfulness. Likewise, stress can appear as an intense concern about our spiritual and moral condition. It can pass as virtue, but it is only another guise for selfishness. We worry because we are overly concerned about the things of this life, forgetting about the kingdom of God. We can relate to the *Peanuts* cartoon character, Charlie Brown. Once Charlie came to see Lucy the psychiatrist. He confessed, “I had to go to the school nurse yesterday because my stomach hurt.” Lucy clucked, “You worry too much, Charlie Brown...No wonder your stomach hurts...You’ve got to stop all this silly worrying!” “How do I stop?” asked the worried patient. Lucy’s inevitably heartless response was, “That’s your worry! Five cents, please!”

But Jesus says we can cease worrying by becoming watchful. Watchfulness, therefore, is a very positive trait. We must be alert and looking for God, ready to advance towards the new kingdom, being illuminated by the Spirit of God, not living for this world alone but living, even today, in the world to come.

Anxiety seeks to take care of what God says he is already accomplishing. Watchfulness, however, is the state of being alert to what God is doing through a servant. Anxiety seeks to be like God, but watchfulness is being alert to what God is doing in our lives. Worry stems from being too involved in this world. Watchfulness comes from being involved in the kingdom that is already, but not yet. Both watchfulness and worry require the same energy, concentration and care, but their focus is very different. Worry gives way to wonder; anxiety gives way to admiration.

I confess I do my fair share of worrying. At times I think the term “worry wart” was specially coined to describe me. But I have found that when I am worrying, I miss God’s daily invasions into my life. I can’t recognize them because I am thinking about myself, my house, my children, my car, whatever. But here in this parable I learn that whenever I am tempted to worry about something, I should turn that energy into watchfulness.

The third thing we learn here is that watchfulness requires a servant’s heart and a healing of our senses. In the story it is the slaves and the steward who are watchful, not the homeowner and the master of the house. This indicates that watchfulness and servanthood somehow go together. Watchfulness is required of a servant who seeks to be responsible while the master is away. The watchful servant inquires of himself or herself what needs to be done, what care needs to be extended in the master’s absence, etc. If we view ourselves as people to be served, we are only watchful for what we can gain, but if we regard ourselves as servants, then we will be watchful for others. This

was what Jesus did, wasn’t it? He said he did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And watchfulness has to do with how we use our senses, those faculties that make us aware of God and of others. In them he has provided us with the equipment we need for access to him. In the same way, spirituality is sensory. God gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, a touch that brings comfort and encouragement. David used the language of the senses in the Psalms: “My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee...I have beheld Thee in the sanctuary, to see Thy power and Thy glory...my lips will praise Thee...my soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips” (Ps 63). Much of the Bible uses this type of language that speaks of our senses.

Having senses doesn’t mean we will use them, however. Animals don’t have this problem, but humans do. Our senses need to be healed so that we might become sensitive toward Jesus. This is accomplished through worship. In worship we recover our senses; we recover a vision of the beauty and glory of the Lord; we make the transition from acquisition to adoration. God has already provided a great deal in beauty and purpose. As we worship we discover that the true meaning of life is not based on what we own, but on what we give and what we perceive to be reality.

This is why we need prayer and quiet times in worship of God. But we fall short, don’t we? We are stressed out, so we seek pleasure. We are burned out, so we take time off. But we do these things merely to be revived physically and emotionally. While it is important that we take time off occasionally, these activities do not always involve our entire person. We get some rest, but then we rush back to the battle, energized and ready to acquire more of this world. We do not seek rest for the right reasons. What we are missing is spiritual healing, the healing of our senses that will make us aware, alert, and ready to the entrance of God into our everyday life, for the coming of his kingdom.

Wordsworth put this beautifully in his poem, *The World Is Too Much With Us*:

The world is too much with us late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,
Little we see in nature that is ours.
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.

When we spend time in prayer, however, meditating on our beds in the night watches, our senses come alive. It is this that enables us to see, hear, taste and feel in the truest sense of these sensory gifts. Then we can arise in the morning, attentive to God’s entrance into our daily routine.

We need to be healed so that we can become watchful.

Finally, there is a blessing that is associated with being watchful and ready. This notion of blessing is repeated in the first and third stories; in fact, verses 37 and 43 are parallel: “How blessed is that slave who is alert when his master comes.” The blessing in the first story has to do with the homeowner’s delight in the servant’s faithfulness, so much so that he himself serves the servant. The blessing in the third story has to do with added responsibilities and care of possessions: to one who is given much, much is required.

In classical literature, the idea of blessing meant freedom from daily cares and worries. In fact, the Hebrew word for blessing, *ashre*, describes the sense of well-being that comes when we are living in harmony with creation and redemption. The psalmist wrote, “How

blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you” (Ps 128). Both the slave and the steward were blessed because they entered into the experience of an unexpected arrival. The slave was seeking to serve, but he discovered that when his master returned, he himself was blessed with the master’s presence. He was able to enter into fellowship, and was even served by his master. The alert steward was rewarded with added responsibility. Joy was both expressed and experienced.

In the same way, when we are ready and alert to the unexpected arrival of God, we enter into the experience of his kingdom. We have a sense of well-being, because we are in tune with the Creator. We are free from worry, because we are not focused on this age but on the age to come. We find that we are in fellowship with God, and he gives to us and serves us because he is delighted to find us alert. Thus we experience life and eternity. We are blessed as a result of being watchful and ready.

Some of our pastors were in Vancouver recently attending a conference. One evening, Pat Harrison, our Junior High pastor, alert and watchful, met a pastor who was all alone and Pat suggested we invite him to have dinner with us. Although we were looking forward to having time together to build fellowship and closeness as a staff, we agreed. We extended an invitation to this man, Glandion, to join us. At dinner, we discovered that he had grown up in the Bay Area. He had even gone to Peninsula Bible Church and had been discipled by a man who in turn had been discipled by Ray Stedman! I can hardly find words to describe how blessed we all were by this brother’s joining us for Christian fellowship.

Watchfulness as a way of being was Jesus’ subject in these three fragments of stories which he taught his disciples as they wandered together in Samaria, the in-between place. Watchfulness involves having a different perspective towards everyday life and looking for the entrance of the kingdom of God. It replaces worry and anxiety. It involves our senses that are healed by prayer and worship, and it results in tremendous blessing and joy.

Edwin Markham’s poem *How The Great Guest Came*, is a great favorite of mine. I would like to conclude this enjoinder to watchfulness by reading it for you.

How the Great Guest Came

Before the cathedral in grandeur rose
 At Ingelburg where the Danube goes;
 Before its forest of silver spires
 Went airily up to the clouds and fires;
 Before the oak had ready a beam,
 While yet the arch was stone and dream—
 There where the alter was later laid,
 Conrad, the cobbler, plied his trade.
 It happened one day at the year’s white end—
 Two neighbors called on their old-time friend;
 And they found the shop, so meager and mean,
 Made gay with a hundred boughs of green.
 Conrad was stitching with face ashine,
 But suddenly stopped as he twitched a twine

“Old friends, good news! At dawn today,
 As the cocks were scaring the night away,
 The Lord appeared in a dream to me,
 And said, ‘I am coming your Guest to be!’
 So I’ve been busy with feet astir,
 Strewing the floor with branches of fir.
 The wall is washed and the shelf is shined,
 And over the rafter the holly twined.
 He comes today, and the table is spread
 With milk and honey and wheaten bread.”

His friends went home; and his face grew still
 As he watched for the shadow across the sill.
 He lived all the moments o’er and o’er,
 When the Lord should enter the lowly door—
 The knock, the call, the latch pulled up,
 The lighted face, the offered cup.
 He would wash the feet where the spikes had been,
 He would kiss the hands where the nails went in,
 And then at the last would sit with Him
 And break the bread as the day grew dim.

While the cobbler mused there passed his pane
 A beggar drenched by the driving rain.
 He called him in from the stony street
 And gave him shoes for his bruised feet.
 The beggar went and there came a crone,
 Her face with wrinkles of sorrow sown.
 A bundle of fagots bowed her back,
 And she was spent with the wrench and rack.
 He gave her his loaf and steadied her load
 As she took her way on the weary road.
 Then to his door came a little child,
 Lost and afraid in the world so wild,
 In the big dark world. Catching it up,
 He gave it the milk in the waiting cup,
 And led it home to its mother’s arms,
 Out of the reach of the world’s alarms.

The day went down in the crimson west
 And with it the hope of the blessed Guest,
 And Conrad sighed as the world turned gray:
 “Why is it, Lord, that your feet delay?
 Did You forget that this was the day?”
 Then soft in the silence a Voice he heard:
 “Lift up your heart, for I kept my word.
 Three times I came to your friendly door;
 Three times my shadow was on your floor.
 I was the beggar with bruised feet;
 I was the woman you gave to eat;
 I was the child on the homeless street!”

May God grant that we will be found watchful and ready when he knocks on our door today.

© 1993 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino