

A Lesson About Faithfulness

Mark 13:35-36 (ESV) ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Main Objectives

In this study, you will (1) identify some of the issues and temptations that come with expectations about the Lord's return, and (2) examine ways to live faithfully in light of the Lord's unknown timetable for His return.

No One Knows the Hour

The Olivet Discourse is one of the most abused passages anywhere in Scripture. Some interpreters relegate the whole discourse to virtual irrelevance by claiming that all the prophetic words in this section of Scripture were completely fulfilled in AD 70 when Roman armies sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Jewish temple. (That view is known as preterism.) At the opposite extreme there are those who seem to think today's newspaper is key to understanding the Olivet Discourse. They scour the daily news for "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 24:6); "famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places" (verse 7); heavenly signs and wonders (verse 29)—or other echoes of this passage.

Of course, they never fail to discover fresh reports that seem to fit the passage. Some seem to think the whole discourse is an extended puzzle containing a code that gives a hidden answer to the disciples' question, "When will these things be?" (verse 3). Almost every decade some false prophet comes along who claims to have figured out precisely when the Lord will return.

But Jesus emphatically denies the possibility of such knowledge: "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (verse 36). In fact, Jesus makes this point repeatedly in the Olivet Discourse: "You do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (verse 42).

Mark 13:33

Mark 13:35

1. Why do you think people are so eager to know when the Lord is coming back?
2. Why does the Lord want us not to know when He is coming back?
3. Have you ever gotten caught up in someone's predictions of when the Lord will return? If so, how did that affect the way you lived? If not, what do you believe keeps you from being drawn into that way of thinking?

The Need for Watchfulness

The point of the parable [of the wise and foolish virgins] is simple: Christ (the bride-groom) is coming. He may arrive later than we expect, and we must be prepared for that possibility. That means remaining awake, staying at the watch, and being ready for Him no matter how late the hour. In fact, as time passes and His arrival grows closer, the need for

watchfulness is greater, not less. The only time we can prepare for Him is now, because His sudden arrival will signal the end of all such opportunity. Those not ready for Him when He arrives will be completely and permanently shut out of the wedding feast.

Ephesians 5:15-16

4. According to Ephesians 5:15-20, how are we to prepare for the possibility that Christ may come at any time?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-10

5. How does Paul exhort his readers in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10 to prepare for the Lord's coming?
6. If being watchful for the Lord's return doesn't mean scrutinizing the headlines for current events that may herald His coming, what does it mean?

Settling the Accounts

[In the parable of the talents,] the time for settling accounts did finally arrive: "After a long time the lord of those servants came" (Matthew 25:19). The faithful servants were commended and rewarded equally. In fact, the master's words to the two faithful servants were identical: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord" (verses 21, 24). They were honored for their faithfulness—not proportionally based on the size of the profit they earned. That is precisely how Scripture describes the judgment seat of Christ: "Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor"—not according to results (1 Corinthians 3:8).

The master's response shows him to be a gracious and generous man. He rewarded the faithful stewards with expanded authority, increased opportunity, and a place of joy and favor. Their reward clearly pictures heaven. Heaven is not a place of eternal boredom and tedious inactivity; it is filled with exaltation and honor, expanded opportunities for service, and the greatest joy of all—endless fellowship with Christ Himself. The promises and parables of Jesus are full of similar imagery signifying heaven (cf Luke 12:35-37, 44; 19:17-19; 22:29-30; John 12:26).

Colossians 3:23-24

Proverbs 16:3

7. Why is it important to know that God will reward us according to our faithful labor, not according to the results we produce?

8. Does it surprise you that heaven is a place of opportunities for service rather than tedious inactivity? What types of service can you imagine doing in heaven?

9. What tends to be your attitude toward work? Do you see it more as a necessary evil or as something that enables you to do things God wants done in the world?

Make the Connection

Read the following Scripture passages and answer the questions provided.

Matthew 24:45-25:13

10. In the first parable, Jesus tells (see 24:45-51), what is the evil servant's error? How does it affect his actions?

11. In the second parable Jesus relates (see 25:1-13), what is the foolish virgins' error? How does it affect their actions?

12. Are you more tempted to live as if the Lord won't return anytime soon, so you can live however you want? Or are you more tempted to live as if He will come soon, so you don't have to plan for the long term? What is the problem with either approach?

1 Peter 5:8

Matthew 25:1-30

Talent: Not coin or currency but a single unit of weight. Even a single talent would be an immense fortune.

13. A talent was a weight of silver (or other precious metal). Even one talent of silver was a large fortune. What do the talents in this parable represent?

14. What was the unprofitable servant's problem?

15. What point are we meant to take away from this parable?

Explore the Key Points

Take some time to consider how some of the big ideas of this chapter intersect with your own life. It will be helpful to answer these questions on your own before you discuss them with your group.

Pictures of Faithfulness

We get three pictures of faithfulness in these three parables. In Matthew 24:45-51, the faithful and wise servant was doing his job feeding the other servants and generally caring for their needs. Part of our job as God's servants is to care for our fellow believers and do whatever work in the world our Master has given us to do. The wise servant is watchful, not complacently doubting whether he will ever be held accountable for his actions. In Matthew 25:1-13, the wise virgins show their faithfulness by planning ahead for the possibility the bridegroom will not come for some extended period of time.

We don't ask what the oil represents, because the parable is not an allegory in which each detail symbolizes something. Instead, we ask more broadly, "What does planning ahead look like for us?" If the Lord might not come for another thousand years, what are the implications for the way we lead our lives, the way we use our money, and the way we care for the planet? The wise virgins show the virtue of waiting, no matter how long the Lord postpones His coming.

Finally, in Matthew 25:14-30, the first two servants who received the talents traded with them to double their investments. They show the virtue of working with whatever God has entrusted to us while we wait for Him. We can ask ourselves, "What has God entrusted to me? How can I invest it in things that matter to Him and contribute to His kingdom agenda?"

16. **Romans 14:12** Any day now, you may have to face the Lord and give an account for the way you have lived. That day might come because He returns or because you die suddenly. How does knowing this affect the way you live?

17. What does planning ahead involve for you? How should you live in case the Lord doesn't intend to come for another thousand years?

Ephesians 2:10

18. What abilities and assets has God entrusted to you? How can you use them to contribute to His kingdom agenda?

Revelation 3:15

Revelation 22:12

Authentic Believers

All three stories contrast the defining characteristics that set authentic Christians apart from unbelievers: faithfulness versus unbelief; wisdom versus folly; and preparedness versus indifference.

None of the characters in these parables picture a halfhearted or lukewarm "carnal Christian." That's because Jesus Himself ruled out the possibility that such people exist. In His own words, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad" (Matthew 12:30). A person is not a true believer if he or she has no real expectation of Christ's return, no eagerness to meet Him, and no love for His appearing. In fact, the lessons of these parables are the same lessons that saving grace teaches every true believer: "That, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12-13).

So, the three parables combined give us one clear and powerful message: "You do not know when the master of the house is coming in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning" (Mark 13:35). For this reason, "you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44). Meanwhile, keep watching, waiting, and working faithfully.

19. How have you seen other believers being faithful to Christ? What does faithfulness look like in them?

20. How have you tried to be faithful to the Lord? What have you done to show the Lord your faithfulness to Him?

21. What opportunities do you have to be faithful in your relationship with God? With others? With yourself?

Living the Parable

We've covered a lot in this lesson. Now it is your chance to pull it all together and decide what is the most important principle(s) you need to take to heart. You probably can't change your life in half a dozen ways this week, so prayerfully consider what is God's top priority for you.

22. What is your main takeaway(s) from this lesson? What do you want to take to heart as you go forward?

23. What are some things you will do to apply what you've learned?