

Luke 12:35-48

³⁵ “Gird your loins and light your lamps ³⁶ and be like servants who await their master’s return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. ³⁸ And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants. ³⁹ Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.” ⁴¹ Then Peter said, “Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?” ⁴² And the Lord replied, “Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute (the) food allowance at the proper time? ⁴³ Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. ⁴⁴ Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. ⁴⁵ But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ then that servant’s master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful. ⁴⁷ That servant who knew his master’s will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; ⁴⁸ and the servant who was ignorant of his master’s will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.

Context

Our gospel follows after the Parable of the Rich Fool (18th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Luke 12:13-21). Unfortunately, the passage in between (vv.22-34) is not used for a Sunday gospel – yet it carries an important context for our passage and serves as a bridge between the lesson of the rich fool and our text which seems to speak of the second coming of the Son of Man and the judgment that awaits.

²² He said to (his) disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! ²⁵ Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your lifespan? ²⁶ If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? ²⁷ Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. ²⁸ If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? ²⁹ As for you, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not worry anymore. ³⁰ All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides. ³² Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. (Luke 12:22-24)

The “missing” text provides the motivation to “Gird your loins and light your lamps” (v.35) – in other words, to get ready because you are and will be well provided for. These verses (vv.22-34) address our motivation by pointing to the care of a loving Father. If one to give a short summary of the verses, it might appear as such:

- Life is more than food, life style, and possessions – all these things are provided for by God.

- Want proof? God provides these things for the ravens (a traditional “unclean” animal) and if God does that for the “unclean” then how much more do you think God will do this for you?
- So don’t be anxious
- While you may want those thing – look and learn what the Father wants to give you. He wants to give the kingdom!! (v.31)
- Make room in your life to receive the kingdom with open hands and arms – give your “stuff” to the poor (give “alms”) and be merciful.

What God requires of us is to give alms, in other words to give to the poor. The word translated “alms” is *eleemosyne*, which comes from a word meaning “mercy.” At the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus said “‘Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?’ He answered, ‘The one who treated him with mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” This message is repeated in the command to “*Sell your belongings and give alms*” (v.33)

Commentary

Having taught about the right use of wealth (vv.22-34, our “missing” text), Jesus reinforces those teachings with the reminder that earthly things are transient at best, but the return of Jesus is certain. In our day, we immediately think in terms of the second coming. But for Jesus’ first century listeners that would be incomprehensible. What is more likely is these verses represent a warning for the impending crisis associated with the crucifixion. While other meanings may accrue, there is a permanent application in that Jesus’ followers must always be ready to face the crises of life in the spirit of true discipleship. This of course only is the beginning of the meaning and in no way exhausts the richness for clearly there is a reference to the second coming. This passage also fits within a larger theme of watchfulness (12:1-13:9) that is connected not only in theme but in using “masters and servants” as a metaphor for learning and reflection.

“be like servants...ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks”

Be it crisis or second coming, central to the test of faith is the challenge of constant readiness for the Master’s return – either in the parousia or in the Spirit. In several ways Jesus emphasizes that the time of the return will be a surprise – the return of the master from a wedding and the coming of a thief whose arrival is not certain. The examples highlight a constant preparedness – even during the long watches of the night (v.38).

Jesus describes servants who will not be found unprepared, but will open the door as soon as the master knocks, and show themselves prepared for whatever service he wants. Any master who finds his servants in such a state of readiness is pleased. This one is so pleased that he reverses the normal roles and has them sit at table while he serves them a meal (v.37). The reward of God’s people is never commonplace: it is always the unexpected.

In v.39 there is a subtle change in the focus of preparedness. Where earlier those to be at the ready were the servants, as regards safeguarding the household, here, it is the master of the house. Jesus rounds off this section with the explicit statement that the disciples do not know when the Son of man is coming. That coming is certain, but the time is not known; it will be “*on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour*” (v. 46). All true disciples must therefore live in constant readiness, as the whole of the foregoing section makes clear.

Who must listen? ⁴¹ Then Peter said, “Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?” Peter perhaps speaks for all the apostles when he asks about the parable. Peter’s question may be meant to raise the question of the privileges and responsibilities of the apostolate. It certainly has relevance to

the work of the ministry, a topic that would have been important to Luke's readers. Both the disciples and the crowd of thousands are introduced in 12:1. In 12:13–14 Jesus responds to a man from the crowd. The sayings introduced in v. 22 are directed to the disciples; therefore, Peter's question in v. 41 asks for clarification regarding the intended audience, but Jesus answers with another parable. Jesus does not answer directly, but draws attention to the responsibility of all servants, stressing that the greater the privilege the greater the responsibility (v.48)

Faithful and prudent. ⁴² *And the Lord replied, "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute (the) food allowance at the proper time?"* ⁴³ *Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so.* ⁴⁴ *Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property.*

In v.42 Jesus used the house steward as the focal point on his response to Peter's question. As vv. 43-46 make clear, the steward is also a servant, not only of the master but also one charged to serve the other servants. This freed the owner from routine administration and it meant that the steward necessarily had considerable freedom of action. If he was *faithful and prudent*" (v.42) he would see that the estate was properly run, which included making sure that all members of the household were duly fed. Jesus speaks of a situation wherein the *master* is absent but returns unexpectedly (v. 43). A diligent steward, whom his master found working efficiently when he thus returned suddenly, would be promoted (v. 44).

But not all stewards are "*faithful and prudent.*" The master's prolonged absence might lead a imprudent steward into a false sense of independence. There was nothing to stop him from indulging his whims; after all he was in charge. Such false allusions lead the steward to stop being attentive to the return of the master – and when that master returns, the steward is caught unprepared. The result would be the punishment and one would assume a return to the role of ordinary servant – a punishment that entails the loss of privileges and comforts. Yet Jesus is telling this parable in the light of his disciples. The steward is punished by being placed among "*the unfaithful*" (v.46).

Failing in faithfulness. ⁴⁵ *But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk,* ⁴⁶ *then that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful.*

Jesus rounds off this section with a warning of the certainty of punishment for those who fail to do their duty (v.47). Verse 45 turns to consider the punishment to come for those who are not "*faithful and prudent*" while the master is away. If the master's absence tempts the servant to say in his heart, "*My master is delayed in coming,*" he will be punished severely. But we should recall that Luke has established repeatedly that Jesus knows what is in a person's heart—2:35; 5:22; 7:39ff.; 9:47; 24:38; Acts 1:24).

As Culpepper [264] notes: "When the master comes, the faithless servant who doubted in his heart will be punished severely. The first punishment is graphic in its violence: He will be cut in two. Fitzmyer comments: 'One should not fail to notice, however, how the punishment of the manager, if he abuses his authority, corresponds to the double life that he would be leading.' The second punishment again employs theological language and speaks of God's judgment on the faithless; he will be 'put with the unfaithful' (cf. 'have no part [μέρος meros]' in 11:36; John 13:8; 2 Cor 6:15).

Responsibility and Culpability. ⁴⁷ *That servant who knew his master's will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely;* ⁴⁸ *and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly.*

I would suggest that these two verses should be read as a response to Peter's question in v.41. Responsibility rests on those who have received much (cf. Amos 3:2). Notice that people are punished not simply for doing wrong, but for failing to do right (cf. Jas 4:17).

Culpepper [264-65] notes: "Following on the description of the severe punishment of the faithless servant in v. 46, v. 47 declares that the slave who knew what his master required and yet did not do it will receive a severe beating, while the slave who did not know but acted culpably will receive a light beating. The distinction can be found in the OT references to sins committed 'with a high hand' and sins of ignorance (Num 15:30; cf. Jam 4:17; 2 Pet 2:21). The two sayings in vv. 47–48 differ in that v.47 concerns refusal to do what is required, while v.48 describes doing what is forbidden—but without the knowledge of what is allowed and what is forbidden...Both servants are punished because no violation of the law can be overlooked, but the severity of the punishment will vary."

It is important that Jesus' servants be active in doing his will. We are apt to be disturbed by the thought that one who sins in ignorance will be punished (v. 48). But we must bear in mind that there is no such thing as absolute moral ignorance (Rom. 1:20, 2:14, 15) and that our very ignorance is part of our sin. The emphasis is on the fact that the beating is *light*, but we should not minimize the importance of doing God's will. God's servant must make every effort to discern the will of God and do it. All are accountable.

Reflection

The disciples of Jesus are to be ready to open to the Master "immediately when he comes." The answer to Peter's question (v. 41) directs the discourse toward the Christian leaders especially. The overriding image of authority in this text is one of service. Something that Jesus applies in a special way to the Twelve as leaders of a restored Israel. Where the servants are to stand in readiness for the return of the master, the stewards are responsible for their own work as well as that of the community as a whole. The care of what has been entrusted foreshadows the parable of the sums of money (19:11–27). The sayings on the distribution of responsibilities or gifts in the concluding verse of the section are clearly pertinent for those in authority, but they have a wider application for all on whom spiritual and temporal gifts have been bestowed.

There is no inconsistency here among responsibility, mercy, and punishment. God's mercy makes allowances for those who do not know what is expected of them. But the most severe punishment is reserved for persons who are entrusted with great responsibilities and who then high-handedly and irresponsibly mistreat others and fail the trust given to them by their Lord. In a time of permissiveness and daily reminders of the pervasiveness of immorality even within the church, these parables can still serve to remind, exhort, and warn Christians of the seriousness of their moral commitments. If much has changed since the first century, some things have changed hardly at all. [Culpepper, 265]

Notes

Luke 12:35 *Gird your loins*: The girding of the loins is a step towards preparedness. The long, flowing robes of the Easterner were picturesque, but prone to hinder serious labor, so working the robe were tucked into a belt about the waist. The fastening of the belt also recalls the preparations for the Exodus (Exod 12:11). The Hebrew people were to be ready to move immediately when the call of the Lord came. In other OT texts the phrase is used as an expression for readiness or service (cf. 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 4:29; 9:1; Job 38:3; 40:7). Other translations try to make sense to the modern reader as follows: NRSV has "be dressed for action;" NIV: "be dressed ready for service;" CEV: "Be ready."

***light your lamps*:** The additional command also emphasizes watchfulness (cf. Exod. 27:20; Lev. 24:2). ***who await*:** The theme of watchfulness, related to the eschatological day of Yahweh, is the emphasis of this parable of the Waiting Servants (12:35–38) and the parable of the Unexpected Thief (12:39–40).

This theme echoes several OT passages (cf. Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Amos 5:18; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:14–18; Mal. 4:5–6).

Luke 12:38 *come in the second or third watch*: The Romans divided the night into four watches, but the Jews into three (cf. Judg. 7:19). Thus Jesus is speaking of servants who watch throughout the night for the coming of their lord.

Luke 12:42 *faithful and prudent*: The parable of the Faithful and Prudent Manager in 12:42–46 possibly alludes to Gen. 39:4–5: “So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field.” Joseph was the archetype of the good steward who while in charge gave all the servants their food allowance at the proper time, especially during the time of crisis (famine)

steward: *oikonómos* or literally, “law of the house”

Luke 12:43 *servant*: *doúlos* generally means slave or bonded servant. The context of the verses allows the translation of “steward.”

Luke 12:45 *My master is delayed in coming*: this statement likely indicates that early Christian expectations for the imminent return of Jesus had undergone some modification. Luke cautions his readers against counting on such a delay and acting irresponsibly. The reference to the delay of the return of the master possibly echoes Habakkuk 2:3 which raises the delay of eschatological salvation as a possibility: “For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” The interpretation in *Targum of the Prophets on Hab. 2:3* is clearly eschatological: “For the prophecy is ready for a time and the end is fixed, nor will it fail; if there is delay in the matter wait for it, for it will come in its time and will not be deferred.”

Luke 12:47-48 *The servant who knew...the servant who was ignorant*: The parable-like saying contrasts a disobedient servant who knows his master’s wishes and one who is ignorant and does something that deserves punishment. This contrast is based on the OT distinction between deliberate sins—sins committed with a “high hand”—and sins done in ignorance, as is described in Num. 15:27–30 (cf. Wis. 6:6–8).

Sources

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