

Always Ready
Matthew 24:42-25:13

Always Ready. That's the motto of the US Coast Guard, responsible as they are for everything from search and rescue to drug interdiction. Always Ready, Always There. That's the motto for the U.S. National Guard, as they head out to protect our borders and help people pick up the pieces of their lives after tornados and hurricanes. Neither Coast Guardsmen or National Guardsmen know when they'll be needed or what they'll be asked to do, so they have to be ready, always ready.

Be Prepared. That's the motto of the Boy Scouts, but it raises an obvious question: "Be prepared for what?" The founder of Scouting, Robert Baden-Powell, gave a succinct answer: "Why, for any old thing." That's why the Scouting program provides instruction in a wide variety of disciplines, from American Heritage, Animal Science and Archery to Welding, Wilderness Survival and Woodcarving – because you never really know what tools or skills you'll need to meet the challenges of each day. As Baden-Powell told his Scouts, "You are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty."

So, what is a Christian's duty? What does it mean for a Christian to be prepared for the coming of Christ? Well, up to this point in Jesus' discussion of His second coming, we've learned some of what it does not mean. It does not involve examining current events in the way a fortune-teller reads tea leaves or tarot cards, trying to determine from the frequency and severity of wars, famines, plagues and earthquakes the day and hour when Jesus will appear in the clouds of heaven. No, in the very first verse of today's passage, He repeats that we don't know and in fact can't know when He will come. That's precisely why we always have to be ready, for as verse 44 makes clear, it's when we least expect Him that He will show up.

But again, what does it mean to be ready? How are we to be prepared for His coming? Well, verses 48 and 49 tell us something else it doesn't include: hurting one another. Being ready doesn't involve imagining that He doesn't care about what we do, or that He is not, in fact, coming to judge the quick and the dead, as we confess every Lord's Day when we recite the Apostles' Creed.

No, if we are truly ready for the coming of our Lord, we must instead admit that we are nothing more than His servants, and thus that we owe Him nothing less than our absolute allegiance. And being a loyal follower of Christ of course means that we must obey the Great Commandment He gave us at the Last Supper: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

So, if all that's true, it should go without saying that the conduct of the evil servant in verse 49 is completely unacceptable: there is simply never any justification for any sort of abuse or violence toward our fellow servants. We must make no place in the Christian community for priests who molest altar boys or pastors who bully church members or who tear apart their own or other people's marriages in order to gratify their lusts. All such violence is completely inconsistent with Christ's call for us to love one another, not to mention our responsibility to bear witness to His self-sacrificial, unconditional love for all who trust in Him.

And we might want to stop with such a full-throated denunciation of Christian hypocrisy, perhaps even looking down on the evil servant of verse 49 with more than a bit of smugness. Moreover, we might imagine that, just because we are not such flagrant sinners, just because we don't hurt people intentionally, that we have therefore made ourselves fit for heaven. And we might even come to the conclusion that Christian ethics involves nothing more than keeping to ourselves, refraining from giving

active offense to those around us. And we Southerners might be especially proud of the fact that so many of our folkways are designed to avoid such conflicts, preferring as we do to pour the oil of good manners on the waters of disagreement, instead of stirring them up or bringing them out into the open.

But before we go too far in congratulating ourselves, let's take a closer look at verse 49. For notice that Jesus condemns the evil servant not just for his violence toward others but for his own excessive eating and drinking.

Really? I mean, Mississippi is the hospitality state, and I like to joke that we spell hospitality "f-r-i-e-d-f-o-o-d." We're always ready for a party, and don't really need much of an excuse to throw one, do we? So, is Jesus saying that this is wrong? But how could just having a good time have any possible connection with actively hurting other people?

Well, it all depends on the attitude we have toward our food and drink. For remember: the evil servant had been placed in charge of his master's household. That meant he was supposed to be on duty, always ready, always watching out for the best interests of his master until the time of his return. But according to verse 48, this evil servant took his eye off the ball. He began to imagine that his master wasn't returning for a long time. And so instead of taking care of his master's property and employees, he started to take advantage of his authority, using his master's possessions for his own selfish purposes. He thus fell into the different sins of gluttony and drunkenness and violence for one common reason: because he imagined that he only needed to be concerned about himself.

And so his example raises a critical question for all of us Christians: are we living for Christ or for ourselves? Is the focus of our lives on the glory of God, or only on gratifying our desires, however innocuous they might be? After all, if the second part of the Great Commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves, what is the first part? "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Unlike like that evil servant, our primary interest, indeed our only concern should be to advance the Kingdom of God, not to feather our own nests or indulge our own pleasures.

So how can we possibly be ready for coming of our Lord and King if we are living our lives in defiance of His commands? How can we possibly be ready for the coming of our Savior and Friend if we are so wrapped up in our own wants that we forget all about Him and what He thinks is best for us? No, it turns out that love for Christ and love for one another are critical components of being ready for His coming.

And as the story of the ten young women points out, our love for Christ must be ready to express itself not just in vague sentiments, but in actions. Now, the setting of this story would have been familiar to Jesus' disciples – indeed to all the people in Jerusalem at the time Jesus first spoke these words. For in that place and time, wedding celebrations always involved processions through the streets of the city, with all the joy if perhaps not quite the gusto of a New Orleans second line.

And there would have been two such parades for each wedding. For before he could get married, the groom had to prepare a place for the couple to live, usually by adding a room onto his family's home. And so once all the preparations had been made, the groom and his friends would travel from his house to the home of the bride, rejoicing all along the way. A second procession would then escort the happy couple back to their new home. And just like in modern times, those who love the bride and groom wanted to be with them on their special day, sharing in their joy with every step.

Now, we don't know if these ten girls were waiting with the bride for the groom to come and get her, or for the joyful couple to return to their new home. But that really isn't the point of the story

– instead, it intends to highlight the question that faces all of us today: were they ready for the bridegroom’s appearance?

At first glance, the answer seems to be “yes.” After all, they had shown up in the right place, and presumably they had on all the right clothes. They trusted that the groom was in fact coming – for instead of going home when the hour grew late, they lingered long enough at his eventual destination for all of them to fall asleep. Oh yes, they were dutifully waiting for the coming of the bridegroom.

But just as was the case with the evil servant, they had actually taken their eyes off of the ball. No, they weren’t hurting anyone or gorging themselves on food that was meant for the reception. Their sin was not active but passive, not something they had done, but something they had failed to do. For what was their purpose? What was their duty? Not just to be at the house when the groom came, but to light his way in the dark, to make a big fuss over him, to glorify him on the last leg of his journey.

And isn’t that what Isaiah called us to do in our responsive reading? “Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!” And no road gets built by leaning on a shovel, does it? No, the valleys have to be lifted up, either with bridges or earthworks. The tops of the hills and mountains have to be leveled off. In the same way, much work needs to be done so that the Lord’s glory can be revealed, so that more and more people will join in the procession, bowing before Christ at His coming, and participating in the great marriage feast of the Lamb.

But because the five foolish maidens hadn’t brought enough oil to keep their lamps burning, they weren’t prepared to do their job, to light the way of the groom. And because they had to run and make such last-minute preparations, they missed their opportunity to be part of the wedding procession. And that meant they didn’t get invited to the party for which they had waited so long.

So that’s the critical question for all of us today: Are we prepared for the coming of the Lord? Have we torn down all the high places in our lives, turning away from all our pride and self-worship? Have we tried to lift up the lonely, the depressed, the poor, and the needy, pointing them to the only One Who can save them? Are we longing for Christ to return, to set all things right and make all things new? Do we really love Him with all our heart and love our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves?

Yes, we say we are servants of the Lord. We say we are waiting for His coming. But have we taken our eyes off of the ball? Have we fallen into selfish ways, focusing more on our own pleasures and desires than on the advancement of His kingdom? Or are we diligently pursuing His interests, caring for the others already in His household? Are we longing to shine a light on Him, singing of His wondrous love so that others might come to worship and serve Him as well? Have we prepared ourselves for His coming by preparing the way of the Lord? Are we ready?