

Luke 12/35-59: INTERPRET THE TIMES, BE RECONCILED, BE READY

Jesus came out of the Pharisee's house, where he had dined with but denounced the Pharisees and teachers of the law (11/37-54), to find a crowd of many thousands waiting for him (12/1).

Jesus began to teach many things, mostly (despite the crowd) to his disciples (12/1-11,22-34), directly addressing the crowd only when someone in the crowd asked him a question (12/13-21).

Where he was and who he was talking to may be important in understanding the passage before us now.

1. Watchfulness & Readiness (v35-48)

In this passage we find 3 parables about servants. The first 2 seem very similar. Any distinction between them comes in the fact that the first is about the *servants* of the master (v37) and the second about the *manager* whom the master puts in charge of his servants (v42). This suggests the first is addressed to all Christians (all Jesus' disciples present) and the second to Christian leaders (the Twelve). Such an interpretation is confirmed by Peter's question (v41): given the fact that Jesus had switched between his disciples and the crowd, it seems like he was confused about exactly who Jesus was telling the first parable to. But v35- follows on directly from Jesus' instruction to his disciples about food and clothing, and heavenly v earthly wealth (v22-): having told a parable to all his disciples, Jesus now tells one to the Twelve. But there is an alternative (or even concurrent) interpretation: the first parable is addressed to all people (all men, whether they know it or not, are servants of God to whom they must give account) and the second to all Christians (those that God sends to reach mankind).

The First Parable (v35-40)

The point of the parable is simple and should not be allegorized: Jesus (v40), like a thief (v39), will come at an hour we neither know nor expect, so we his servants [Christians / all men] need to keep ourselves prepared in life and ministry (dressed for service and lamps ready) *all* the time so we are ready to receive him at *any* time. We need to not only be "ready" but "watching": expecting his coming and living accordingly. A promise of blessing/reward is spoken to those servants who are found ready and watching (prophetically enacted in Jn 13).

[The point of the thief analogy, here and elsewhere, is not that Jesus' return is secret but the timing is unknown]

The Second Parable (v35-46)

Similarly, the manager put in charge of the servants (but who nevertheless remains a servant: v42 cf. v43) must be found ready and watching, doing what he was commissioned to do, when his master returns. Again, there is the promise of reward and blessing (increased responsibility in heaven?) for the 'faithful and wise manager' who does this (v43-44). But in this parable the consequences of not being found ready (only implicit in the first parable) are spelt out (v45-46): the manager who sees

in his master's long 'delay' an opportunity to abuse (v feed) his fellow-servants, and to feed himself instead of the servants, will suffer severe loss.

The Third Parable (v47-48)

Following on from the judgement suffered by the unfaithful manager/servant, Jesus (with reference to both parables) elaborates on the judgement suffered by all unfaithful servants ('servant' here must refer to all men, as all Christians know God's will). Most commentators believe this short, little-known and rather difficult parable, recorded only by Luke, refers (cf. the different levels of reward enjoyed by believers in heaven) to the degrees of punishment suffered in hell (such an interpretation agrees with the words that immediately precede it: 'a place with the unbelievers' [v46]). Those that have only received a general revelation of God and his will (through creation and conscience) are less culpable and receive 'fewer blows'; those who have received special revelation (God's revelation of himself and his salvation) through Israel, Christ and the Scriptures (including the church's preaching of the gospel) and reject it are more culpable and receive 'many blows'. "Everyone" in v48b could refer to: (i) some men (who receive special revelation); (ii) all Christians (who receive salvation and are entrusted with the kingdom); or (iii) some Christians, who receive a special call and endowment.

Lessons for Us

The whole chapter so far has been about being prepared: for everything about our lives one day being brought into the light (v1-3); for opposition and persecution (v4-11); for death – and having our wealth in the right place when that happens (v13-34, see especially v21&33). Now Jesus exhorts us to be prepared for his return.

(1) Jesus does not tell us how that will happen, still less when. He does not encourage us to begin speculating about these things; he nowhere suggests they are matters which should occupy our minds but not affect our lives. Throughout the Bible, prophecy is a *forth-telling*, which only sometimes includes *foretelling*: it is God's word to us *now* – and if some aspect of the future is revealed, it is only so we can act in the present in the light of that future (because that then, do this now). 2 Peter 3 is a classic illustration of this true purpose of prophecy. Peter describes in vivid terms the cosmic turbulence that accompanies, and the judgement that follows, Christ's coming (v3-10). Precisely because these things are going to happen, men should live in a certain way now (v11-12a) The pattern is repeated. Peter again describes vividly what is going to happen (v12b-13). And again he emphasizes this should lead to believers living holy (v14) and unbelievers finding salvation (v15a cf. v9). In the Bible, the purpose of prophecy (even predictive elements) is never *speculation* but always *sanctification*. This is exactly what Jesus intends in Luke 12. Because the Master will return, be ready; because he will return at an hour you neither know nor expect, maintain readiness all the time. The last thing Jesus intended was for us to speculate about the timing: he expressly says we won't know the time – so why try and work it out?

(2) Being watchful and ready is not about knowing something but doing something. 'Watching' (v37) = 'doing so' (v43) = 'does not get ready or does not do' (v47). While 'watching' contains the elements of anticipating, looking out for and eagerly desiring Jesus' return, being 'ready' or prepared for it means we are living holy and ministering faithfully – that Jesus will find our being and doing as he desires and requires when he returns. The parable is not an allegory, but elsewhere in the Bible clean/white v dirty garments stands for the righteousness or otherwise of our lives

(e.g. Re 19/8), and lamps for our service or ministry; thus v35 ('be dressed...keep your lamps burning') suggests that the readiness of God's servants consists of holiness in life & obedience in service.

In both these applications, these parables continue the thrust of the whole chapter: we live in the present in the light of the future. Indeed, how we live in the present affects and determines our future.

The two short sections which close ch12 may appear unconnected with all this – but closer examination shows that they continue the themes of v35-48 & of the whole chapter (readiness, living now in the light of the future).

2. Not Peace but Division (v49-53)

Having spoken of his return, Jesus expresses a longing for the fulfilment of all things that will be brought about at and through his return (v49; 'fire' here refers to eschatological judgment and renewal [cf. 3/16]). But before that, in order for that to happen, he must undergo a baptism of suffering (on the cross) in this first coming (v50).

Contrary to what many may have expected from Messianic prophecies before his first coming, or what we may expect in hearing about Jesus since he came, his coming results not in peace but division! (v51). Note the effect -as-purpose idiom, used here to heighten effect: the NT makes it quite clear that Jesus is our peace, gives us peace, and came to make peace – between man and God and man and man. But here, to highlight the shocking effect of his coming – division! (that many would reject him) – it is represented as the purpose of his coming.

When Jesus comes a second time he clearly divides mankind: he separates the righteous from the wicked (Mw 25). But even now he divides men (men are divided) by their acceptance or rejection of him (Jn 3/16-21,33). Indeed, the division he makes then is based on that which we make now.

Now for the most shocking reality: this dividing line runs right through families (v52-53). If we are going to be dressed ready for his return, we may have to live with this division: our loyalty to our master needs to override our loyalty to our family. There is no neutral ground with Jesus: if we are not for him we are against him (1/23

3. Interpreting the Times (v54-59)

Speaking once again to the crowd, Jesus calls them "Hypocrites!" because they pretend to have insight but don't: they are able to interpret the weather but not "this present time", i.e. this time of God's visitation – and opportunity for salvation – in the person of his Son (v54-56)[the signs of spiritual crisis, the coming of the Messiah, the threat of his death, the coming confrontation with Rome, and the eternal consequences of these events for their own lives]. Note: it is not some future time Jesus expects us to interpret but our present time.

Jesus ends with a little homily on making right with your adversary (v57-59). It would certainly hold true (and be helpful to us) as a literal/straightforward instruction – and indeed appears as such elsewhere (Mw 5/25-26).

But here, in this context (following his rebuke of the crowd for not being able to interpret ‘this present time’ of his coming), it is a decidedly odd thing to say – unless we realize he here means it figuratively. People should judge for themselves what is right (v57), i.e. judge rightly who he is, and not just take their cue from what the Pharisees, Rome or their families say (all 3 parties appear in the chapter). Jesus is turning this teaching into a parable about man and God: as they would with a human adversary, people should do everything they can to be reconciled with God before it’s too late! A person must accept God on his terms; the signs of the times call for immediate decision, before judgement falls on the individual and nation.

[1+2+3] Taken together, the message of the whole passage (v35-59) comes down to this (it’s in reverse order): *Interpret this present time – Be reconciled to God while you can – Be watchful and ready for Jesus’ return!*

{P.S. We are halfway through Luke in chapters (12 down, 12 to go)! But 2/3 in Sundays (16 down, 9 to go)!}

Contextualization/Application

What [other] things may people be watching/preparing for in their lives?

Are they always good, and are they certain? [Jesus’ return is perfectly good and absolutely certain.]

Do they have a time frame, after which we decrease/cease our watching? [We don’t know the time of Jesus’ return so he is never late; there is never any cause to watch/prepare for his coming with less zeal & confidence.]

Do they only involve watching (anticipating, desiring, looking forward to) or do they require doing something (getting prepared so we can take advantage of it when it comes)? [Watching for Jesus’ return involves both.]

We could be watching/preparing for a birth or a death, for a promotion or a raise, for a holiday, for an operation in hospital or release from prison, for us to win the lottery or our football team to win the league?

What about watching for political, economic, social or moral changes in society– esp where we hope to benefit?

Those watching for a marriage partner: are they merely waiting/hoping or are they ‘dressed ready’ so that when the right person/time comes they can take advantage of it? How do you prepare?

Those watching for an education or career opening: ditto?

Those desiring to hear God, to be called by God, to be promoted in God, to receive from God, to be sent by God, etc: have they prepared themselves in every way they can so they don’t miss God when he speaks, get passed by when he calls or sends, their promotion or gift/anointing gets delayed, etc. How do you prepare?

How much have we been given, been entrusted with? How much will be demanded and asked of us!

(special revelation, salvation, the kingdom, n talents, s gifts, life & ministry opportunities/responsibilities, etc)

Gospel

A possible gospel angle comes with (in) the same overall closing exhortation to believers:

Interpret this present time

– the ‘year’ of God’s favour (Lk 4/19), the delay in Jesus’ return that gives time for repentance (2 Pe 3/9)

– perhaps you also sense God is knocking on your heart right now, convicting and drawing you in this p time

Be reconciled with God while you can

Judge for yourself (v what others have told you) what is right, who Jesus really is

The consequences of not doing so – judging who Jesus really is, not being recon to God – are real and terrible

It’s not what he wants – and he’s giving us the opportunity now for a different outcome

Be watchful and ready for Christ’s return

Once we believe in Jesus, we can with reality; confidence and eagerness look forward to his return

Be ready for it by going forward from here to live the life that pleases him and do the works that serve him