

The Homeowner and the Thief

Matthew 24:43-44

I'm going to begin this morning with two reminders and then with a question. The first reminder is that ***God demands whole-hearted devotion***. In Deuteronomy 6:5 Moses said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Jesus routinely said that those who follow Him need to forsake every other allegiance and devote themselves to Him wholeheartedly. He said things like, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up the cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). God wants us to follow Him in a very comprehensive way. We're frequently warned against being luke-warm and double-minded and half-hearted.

The second reminder is that ***God also provides the capacity to pursue whole-hearted devotion to Him***. He doesn't demand whole-hearted devotion and then step back and say, "Good luck." No, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God provides everything we need: every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ***the*** Holy Spirit to indwell and empower, the Scriptures that nourish us and give us wisdom we'd never figure out, the body of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit. God provides the capacity to pursue whole-hearted devotion to Himself.

The question is ***Do you intend to be whole-heartedly devoted to God every hour of every day?*** Is that your intention - what you are planning for and going for in your life? I hope you don't accuse me of "leading the witness," but you probably wouldn't tell your employer, "I'm intending to work hard 75% of the time and goof off 25% of the time." Nobody tells his wife, "I'm going to be faithful to you 90% of the time, but the other 10% . . ."

Today we are going to consider a parable that challenges us to be whole-heartedly devoted to God every hour of every day. That should be our intention. This parable is found in Matthew 24. We're in the midst of a six-week sermon series from the parables of Jesus. We're calling this series "Glimpses of God" because the parables give us a glimpse of who God is and how He relates to us. Today we are going to get a glimpse of how constantly God expects us to follow Him.

Matthew 24 and 25 contain a series of parables and teachings about "the end of the age" (24:3). We are presently living in the period of time known as the "last days" - the period of time between the first coming of Christ (2,000 years ago) and the second coming of Christ. Jesus is describing what will happen at the very end of the last days just before His return. He describes events that are observable in every generation, but that will be intensified at the very end of the age: persecution, lawlessness, love that has "grown cold," etc.

Jesus says two things about His return at the end of the age: it is both certain and unpredictable. On the one hand, there should be no doubt that Christ will return (it's certain); on the other hand, nobody knows when that will be (unpredictable). Jesus' disciples probably never would have believed that we'd be here 2,000 years later still

awaiting the return of Christ. In every generation there have been some who've believed that everything pointed to the return of Christ in their day. Eventually somebody will be right, but nobody has been right yet. Instead of making pronouncements about **when** He is returning, Jesus stresses that His followers should live the type of life that's compatible with the conviction **that** He is returning.

Living in a state of spiritual readiness. (Matthew 24:42-44) This context leads us to the parable we are going to consider today. Let's begin in verse 42.

42 "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.

We'll see this term that's translated "be on the alert" in verses 43 and 44 also. This term is used 22 times in the New Testament to describe a state of alertness or readiness. In Matthew 26, for example, Jesus and three of His disciples were in the Garden of Gethsemane. While Jesus was agonizing in prayer about His impending death, He commanded His disciples to "keep watch" or "be on the alert." Jesus wanted them to be fully awake and **with** Him spiritually. Instead, they fell asleep - repeatedly fell asleep. We can all sympathize with their lack of alertness.

In 1 Peter 5:8 Peter says, "Be of sober spirit, **be on the alert**. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." He's advocating the type of alertness that you should have if you knew that a lion had escaped from the zoo and was prowling around your neighborhood.

Here in Matthew 24 Jesus tells His followers to live in a state of alertness/readiness because they "do not know which day your Lord is coming." They know **that** He is coming; they just don't know when it will be.

In verse 43 Jesus tells a parable that illustrates the ruin that comes from not being "on the alert."

43 "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.

Generally speaking, thieves do their work at a time when homeowners are least alert - usually when they're not even home. Jesus appeals to this common experience when He says that if the head of the house had somehow known that the thief were going to arrive at 2 a.m., he would have been "on the alert." He would have been waiting with a sword or a big dog or a security guard or something. If he had been "on the alert" he would not have allowed his house to be broken into.

Because he **wasn't** on the alert, he experienced great loss. In light of this parable, Jesus returns to His initial point in verse 44:

44 “For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think *He will*.”

Just like a thief who comes unexpectedly, Jesus will come “at an hour when you do not think He will.” Jesus has already made this point repeatedly in Matthew 24. In verses 23ff Jesus says, “Don’t believe anybody who says that they’ve figured out where Christ is or when He’s returning.” Jesus said that when He returns you won’t have to take anybody’s word for it; His coming will be like a flash of lightening - going from one end of the sky to the other. It will be that obvious and unmistakeable. But He will come at an hour when you do not think He will.

Given this uncertainty about **when** Christ will return, what should His followers do? “You must be ready. Live your life in a state of constant readiness.” If you live in a state of constant spiritual alertness, you will never caught off guard when Christ returns unexpectedly. It’s sort of like driving the speed limit. If you drive the speed limit your heart doesn’t jump into your throat when you see a Highway Patrol car on the side of the road. If you are living in a state of readiness, you don’t have to dread the return of Christ or be caught off guard when Christ returns unexpectedly.

Paul stressed this same point in 1 Thessalonians 5 using the same imagery:

2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober.

If you’re alert and sober (both literally and metaphorically), it’s okay that Jesus will return like a thief in the night.

The glimpse of God we get from this parable is that **God expects us to live in a state of spiritual readiness**. He wants us to live in a state of spiritual readiness every hour of every day. After all we’re called the “bride of Christ” . . . when He returns He expects His bride to be faithful. Nobody wants his bride to be faithful 75% of the time or 90% of the time . . .

Since this is God’s expectation, this should be our intention. We should intend to live every hour of every day in a way that pleases God. I’m not saying that we will live this out perfectly, but our intentions are critical because we rarely do things that we don’t **intend** to do.

So what does it look like to live in a state of spiritual readiness?

Some people have withdrawn from normal responsibilities and switched into return-of-Christ mode. You eliminate everything that isn't explicitly spiritual. Apparently some within the church at Thessalonica did this in the first century. They weren't fulfilling their normal responsibilities (like working their jobs) because they believed that Christ was returning any day. Paul had to write and tell them to work with their hands and lead a quiet life and not be busybodies (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

I used to know a guy who lived a version of this lifestyle; he almost never rested because there was so much to do for God. Lots of people tried to warn him against living that way, but he wouldn't hear any of it. He told me one time, "It's better to burn out than rust out. . ." The problem with that logic is that either way you're "out"! Isn't it possible to be fully committed to Jesus **and** stay "in"? Surely it's possible to adopt a God-honoring lifestyle that you can maintain indefinitely without burning out or rusting out!

As with many commands in Scripture it's relatively easy to say what "being on the alert" **isn't**. But what **is** it? What does it look like to live in a state of alertness? One answer to this question comes from the next parable found in Matthew 24. Let's read just two verses:

45 "Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46 "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.

Don't you love it when people walk in on you and you're doing what you're supposed to be doing? That's how you know if you're living in a state of spiritual readiness: if when your Master returns He finds you doing what He's told you to do.

That being the case, it would make sense to think through the primary areas of your life and evaluate whether or not you're doing what you're supposed to be doing - in terms of work, relationships, serving others, areas of obedience, etc. Then we evaluate whether we're doing these things in a way that honors God. A life of spiritual readiness may or may not involve doing new things; it may simply involve doing the things you're already doing with a renewed purpose and faithfulness.

Let's think through how we might live in a state of spiritual readiness a few areas of life. Specifically I want us to consider whether or not we have the intention of honoring God in every area of life every hour of every day. That's what the parable suggests. In this way we avoid being like the homeowner who wasn't alert and prepared when the thief came.

Let's think about our **work**, for example. One of the reasons why we do "work interviews" (like the one I did with Lorissa a few minutes ago) is to stimulate our thinking about how we can be faithful in "the main thing" we've been called to do - our work. Since your work is the main thing you do every week, it's a lot more likely that Jesus will return while you're at work than when you're reading your Bible or praying or on a

missions trip. You don't want to be like the homeowner in the parable because you've written off your work as unspiritual and insignificant. It's worth thinking about how your work furthers the purposes of God and then you can "do your work heartily as unto the Lord . . . it is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossians 3:23-24).

This coming week, do you intend to do your work heartily, for the Lord, knowing that you're really "working" for Him? If so, you can enter into your work with faith and with the anticipation that even though it's tough (and no fun at times) God will further His purposes through what you do and how you do it.

Think about **relationships**. Think of the core relationships God has given you: family, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, coworkers, neighbors. I know relationships can be overwhelming at times, but we should each have the sense, "I am doing what I am supposed to be doing in these core relationships. The main thing we are supposed to be doing is ***loving others well***.

You probably remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 about love. He said that it's possible to have amazing spiritual gifts, you can have all knowledge (you can be a Bible genius or brilliant in your field; you can know more than everybody else), you can do things that seem altruistic and heroic (like giving away all your money to the poor), but if you don't have love, it's all really worthless. And love is patient, kind, not arrogant, doesn't hold grudges, etc.

If Christ returned today would He find you loving others fervently from the heart? Perhaps you're currently like the homeowner in a relationship or two; maybe you haven't been loving as you should. If so, it's time to engage your will, make it your intention to love well, and take specific steps to do differently.

Perhaps there's an area of ***obedience*** in which you haven't been very alert. The goal of the Christian life isn't merely to avoid sinning, but sin can compromise our spiritual, mental, and emotional alertness. Sin dulls our senses and lures us away from spiritual readiness. Again, is it your intention to be obedient in every area of your life?

This morning I want to challenge and encourage us all to make it our ambition and our intention to ***live in a state of constant readiness***. My sense is that many, many Christians live their lives with a sense of dread - a sense of dread at what will happen when Christ returns. "Jesus may let me into heaven, but He's not going to be happy with me."

Dream with me for a minute. . . Imagine the possibility of living your life in such a way that you'd honestly be okay if Jesus returned any hour of any day. Imagine the freedom. Imagine the satisfaction. Since that's God's expectation, that should be our intention. And remember that the death and resurrection makes this type of life possible. And when we blow it and live inconsistent lives and wander away from spiritual alertness, there's forgiveness and a fresh start.