

Ready for the Master

Luke 12:42–48; 1 Peter 4:7–11

Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

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I still remember clearly what happened at the turn of the century, twenty-six years ago, when the year changed from 1999 to 2000. In the period leading up to that time, many Christians around the world were filled with a mixture of excitement and fear. Some believed that the end of the world was imminent and that Christ would return at the turn of the millennium. I witnessed this in my own church and in other churches in my hometown. I was a teenager at the time, and I remember how people could feel both excited and fearful about what they believed was about to happen.

Thankfully, my own church was not caught up in the more extreme views and practices that emerged in some Christian groups. In some places, people were so convinced that the world was about to end that they sold their homes and donated the money to their churches. Some couples cancelled their wedding plans, while others resigned from their jobs because they believed there was no point planning for a future that would never come. Looking back, we can see how misguided and damaging such responses were.

When we reflect on how people understand and respond to the biblical teaching about the return of Christ, there are two extremes we need to avoid. The first is to disbelieve or ignore the biblical truth that Jesus Christ will return. We become so absorbed in our everyday lives that we forget that this world, as we know it, will not continue forever. One day, Christ will return, and we will all stand before him. The other extreme is to become so preoccupied with Christ's return that we neglect the responsibilities God has given us in the present. We spend so much time speculating about the end that we become, in a sense, too heavenly-minded to be of earthly use.

We need to strike the right balance. We should eagerly look forward to the return of our Lord, but we must not forget that we have work to do here and now. In fact, the best way to prepare for the return of Christ is to be faithfully engaged in the work he has entrusted to us. This is the important principle that emerges from our two weddings today. In Luke 12:42–48, Jesus tells a parable about a faithful and wise manager. In 1 Peter 4:7–11, the apostle Peter explains how Christians should live as they await the end of all things. Let us consider what these passages teach us.

The Master expects us to be faithful.

In Luke 12, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who puts one of his servants in charge of his household while he is away. The manager is responsible for looking after the other servants and ensuring that they receive their food at the proper time. The master has entrusted him with a significant responsibility. The manager is expected to carry out his duties faithfully until the master returns. Jesus says in verse 43: “Blessed is that servant whom his master will find at work when he arrives.”

Notice what makes this servant commendable. He is not commended because he knows exactly when the master will return. Nor is he commended because he spends all his time wondering when that day will come. He is commended because he is found doing what his master has entrusted him to do. He takes his responsibility seriously. He looks after the household. He ensures that the other servants are cared for. He does not abandon his duties simply because the master is away. And when the master returns, he finds his servant faithfully carrying out his responsibilities. Jesus goes on to say that the master will reward this servant by putting him in charge of all his possessions. What a wonderful picture of faithful service!

But Jesus also describes another servant who behaves very differently. This servant says to himself, “My master is taking a long time in coming.” Instead of continuing to fulfil his responsibilities, he begins to mistreat the other servants. He eats and drinks and gets drunk. He acts as though the master’s absence means that he is free to do whatever he pleases. He forgets that he is still accountable to his master, even when the master is not physically present. But the master does return. And when he does, the unfaithful servant faces severe judgment.

Jesus is giving us a serious warning. The fact that our Lord has not yet returned does not mean that we are free to live however we please. Nor does it mean that we can neglect the responsibilities he has entrusted to us. We may not know when Christ will return, but we do know that he will return. And when he does, he will call his servants to account.

Jesus concludes this passage by teaching that those who know their master’s will and fail to act accordingly will be held more accountable than those who have had less understanding. To whom much has been given, much will be required. In other words, the privileges and responsibilities God entrusts to us are not to be taken lightly.

This is an important principle for us as Christians. God has entrusted each of us with time, abilities, opportunities and resources. He has given us his Word, the good news of Jesus Christ, and a place in his church. He has also given us opportunities to love and serve people around us. The question is not whether we have all been given the same gifts or responsibilities. We have not. The question is whether we are faithfully using what God has entrusted to us.

And this applies not only to individual Christians but also to us as a church. What has God entrusted to St Augustine's Church? What opportunities has he given us to proclaim his gospel, nurture disciples, care for people in need and serve our community. We should not simply be asking how we can preserve what we have. We should also be asking how we can faithfully use what God has given us for the sake of his kingdom.

The end is near, so live wisely.

Our second reading, from 1 Peter chapter 4, complements the teaching of Jesus beautifully. Peter writes in verse 7: "The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray."

You might be thinking, "Peter wrote these words almost two thousand years ago. How could he say that the end of all things is near?" It is a reasonable question, and we need to understand what Peter means.

The New Testament teaches us that, with the coming of Jesus Christ, we have entered the last days. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has accomplished the decisive work of our salvation. He has defeated the power of sin and death and opened the way for us to be reconciled to God. We now live between Christ's first coming and his promised return. We look forward to the day when he will return in glory, raise the dead, judge the world and bring God's saving purposes to completion.

Jesus has also made it clear that no one knows the day or hour of his return. We are not given permission to calculate the date or predict precisely when the end will come. Peter himself addresses this question elsewhere in his second letter. He reminds his readers that the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Rather, God is patient, giving people time to repent and turn to him.

So, when Peter says that the end of all things is near, he is not giving us a timetable. He is reminding us that history is moving toward God's appointed conclusion and that the return of Christ should shape the way we live today.

And notice what Peter says next: "Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray." He does not tell us to be obsessed with predicting the end. He calls us to prayer. He then goes on to speak about loving one another deeply, showing hospitality, and using our gifts to serve others.

This is significant. Peter connects the expectation of Christ's return with the everyday responsibilities of Christian living. In other words, the question is not simply whether we believe

that Christ will return. The question is whether that belief makes a difference to how we live. Do we pray? Do we love people? Do we welcome others? Do we use our gifts to serve the Lord and his people? These are the things that should characterise Christians who are waiting for their Master.

Let us consider four practical ways Peter calls us to live as we await Christ's return.

Be watchful in prayer

First, Peter calls us to be alert and of sober mind so that we can pray. Prayer is essential to the life of every Christian and every church. Yet, if we are honest, it is often one of the things we neglect. Sometimes we treat prayer as our last resort. We try everything else first, and when nothing seems to work, we finally turn to God.

Of course, we should pray when we face difficulties. But prayer is not merely something we do when we are desperate. Prayer is an essential part of our relationship with God. Through prayer, we express our dependence on him. We bring our concerns before him, give thanks for his goodness, confess our sins, seek his wisdom, and ask for his help. We also learn to listen to his Word and align ourselves with his purposes.

If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is coming again, we should be people who depend on God in prayer as we seek to live faithfully in the present. We should pray for ourselves, that we may grow in faith and holiness. We should pray for our families, our church, our community and our world. We should pray for those who do not yet know Jesus Christ that they may come to hear and receive the good news of salvation. And we should pray for our church, that God will help us discern his purposes and give us the wisdom, courage and faithfulness to carry out the work he has entrusted to us.

Love one another deeply

Secondly, Peter says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Notice those words, "Above all." Peter places a particular emphasis on love. Christian love is more than a feeling or an emotion. Feelings have their place, of course, but love also involves our will and our actions. Love means genuinely caring about others, taking an interest in their lives, being willing to forgive, and seeking their good.

Peter is speaking particularly about the love Christians should have for one another. It is often relatively easy to love those we already know well, those who share our interests, and those with whom we naturally get along. But Christian love must extend beyond our circle of friends. It includes those we find difficult to love, those who have different backgrounds and experiences from ours, and those with whom we may not always agree.

It also includes people who are new to our church. Imagine coming to a church for the first time. You do not know anyone. You may feel uncertain about where to sit, what to do, or whether anyone will speak to you. Perhaps you are looking for friendship, encouragement, or a community in which you can grow in your faith. Would it not be wonderful to be warmly welcomed by people who genuinely care about you? Sadly, that does not always happen. A church can be occupied with its existing activities and relationships that it unintentionally overlooks newcomers.

Peter reminds us that we are called to love one another “deeply.” This means being intentional about welcoming people, getting to know them, listening to their stories, and helping them find a place in our church community.

Peter also says that love covers over a multitude of sins. This does not mean ignoring wrongdoing or pretending that sin does not matter. Rather, it points to the willingness to forgive, to bear with one another patiently, and to seek reconciliation rather than allowing every offence to become a lasting division. As we await our Master, let us be a church marked by genuine Christian love.

Show hospitality and serve faithfully

Thirdly, Peter says, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” Hospitality is one practical expression of Christian love. It means making room for others and helping them feel welcome. For some people, hospitality comes naturally. They enjoy opening their homes, preparing meals and inviting others in. For others, it may not come quite so easily.

But hospitality does not have to be complicated or expensive. It does not always require us to invite someone into our home for a meal. It may mean sitting down with someone for a cup of tea or coffee, inviting a newcomer to join us after a church service, visiting someone who is unwell, or preparing a meal for a person or family going through a difficult time. What matters is not the size of the gesture but the love behind it.

Finally, Peter says, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” Notice that Peter says “each of you.” Every Christian has a part to play in the life and mission of the church. We may not all have the same gifts, abilities or opportunities, but each of us can contribute in some way. Some are gifted in teaching and explaining God’s Word. Others are gifted in caring for people, encouraging others, showing hospitality, organising activities, offering practical assistance, or giving generously to support the work of the gospel.

Peter reminds us that these gifts are not given merely for our own benefit. They are entrusted to us so that we can serve others. He goes on to say that those who speak should speak as those who speak the very words of God, and those who serve should do so with the strength God provides. The ultimate purpose is that God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

This is what faithful stewardship looks like. We recognise that what we have comes from God, and we seek to use it in ways that honour him and benefit others. We do not need to wait until we have more time, more money or better circumstances before we begin serving. We can start with what God has already placed in our hands.

Jesus tells us that the wise and faithful servant is the one whom the Master finds carrying out his responsibilities when he comes. Peter reminds us that as we await the end of all things, we are to pray, love one another deeply, show hospitality and use our gifts to serve others.

So let us be a people who pray faithfully, love generously, welcome warmly and serve willingly. Let us take seriously the gifts and opportunities God has entrusted to us. We do not know when our Lord will return, but we know that he will return, and we know what he has called us to do while we wait. May you and I be found faithfully serving him when he comes.

Amen.