

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Luke 12:35-48**  
**“The Glory And The Gore”**

May 11, 2014  
(4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

VIIIIG: LUKE 12:35-48 "THE GLORY AND THE GORE"

Prepared For The Parousia, Post-Easter View

1) vv.35-40 THE IMPORTANCE OF PERPETUAL READINESS FOR ALL DISCIPLES (Only Luke).

v.32, Sharp Change Of Tone, The Lord Is Near If Not Yet Here

a) vv.35 Command To Readiness (Day/ Night). Day And Night! Live Alert! State Of Mind

"Let your loins be (already) girded and your lamps (continually) burning, Gathered (Ex. 12:11, 27:20), Night Lamps Live With An Eye To Heaven, Dressed For Action

b) v.36 Wedding Image/Analogy: Expected Positive Situation. Kyrion, A Ready Openness!

and be like men who are waiting for their MASTER to come home from the marriage feast, Mt. 24:42-51

so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. 7 Days? Open To Master At Any Moment

Imagery = Well-Staffed Households

c) vv.37-38 Blessing On Ready And Awake And Alert Servants. //Mk. 13:33-37

1 Blessed are those servants 1/1' = Macarism, v.43, Never Off Duty

2 whom the MASTER finds awake We Live Between The Times In The End Times

3 when he comes; Orthodox, Christ-Focused Church Life, Creeds

4 truly (amen), I say to you, //v.44

he will gird himself and have them sit at table, //v.35, Lit. recline

4' and he will come and serve them. God's New Household!

3' If he comes 1:52b, 22:27 Hierarchy Reversed

2' in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, Awake During Sleep! 9PM-3AM

1' blessed are those servants! Fragment Parable: Returning Master, vv.36-38

Fragment Parable: Householder & Thief, vv.39-40

b') v.39 Thief Image/Analogy: Unexpected Negative Situation. Hyperbole! Watchfulness

But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, High Ranking

he would not have left his house to be broken into. // I Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pt. 3:10, Rev. 3:3, 16:15

Unprotected Methodist House Already Invaded?

a') v.40 Command To Readiness + Reason: for. Coming Certain, Tim ing Not, Speculation Is Futile!

You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour." 19:44, Open To Master At Any Moment

All Believers To Be Ready: Witness, Good Works, Expectant

2) vv.41-48 THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITHFULNESS FOR LEADERS.

Spokesman: Peter Interrupts, Parables Interpreted By Jesus

a) v.41 Peter's Question (Only in Luke).

v.42 = Answerable To Master, Also To Slaves

Peter said, "Lord (Master), are you telling this parable for us or for all?"

Yes! Us = Twelve, Pastoral Leaders

Peter's Question (v.41) Answered By Jesus' Question (v. 42)

b) vv.42-48 Jesus' Answer.

//Mt. 24:45-51 (Q), Warnings About Abuse Of Church Leadership

(Acts 20:17, 28-31, I Cor. 3:10-15, 11:21, I Tim. 4:12-16, 2 Pt. 2:1-3, 13)

(1) v.42 Question On Who And What Is Entrusted.

Compare Mt. 25: 45-51 with Lk. 12:39-46

And the Lord (Master) said,

Not Boss But Serve, Under-Servant Over Others, Temporary

"Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his MASTER will set over his household slaves,

Lord's Household

to give them their portion of food at the proper time?

9:12-17, 10:21-24, Regular Feeding/ Word/ Care (Jn. 21:15-17)

Slavery Culturally Assumed, Faithful In A Little

(2) vv.43-44 Faithful Servant Rewarded.

How We Follow Jesus Determines Our Future

Blessed is that servant whom his MASTER when he comes will find so doing.

//v.37b, Know + Do

Truly (amen), I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.

19:15-19, Privilege

Now Permanent, Motivation (Lk. 19:15-19)

(2') vv.45-48a Unfaithful Servants Punished (3 Gradations: Fatal, Severe, Light).

a1 But if (suppose) that servant says to himself, 'My MASTER is delayed in coming,' Accountability Is Far Off!

and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants,

Vivid Realism, Misuse Of Authority

and to eat and drink and get drunk,

//12:19, Sinful Self- Indulgence, Know + Disobey

2 the MASTER of that servant will come

We Should Fear Neglect Of Duty! Mortal Blow!

on a day when he does not expect him/ and at an hour he does not know/, Redundant Time, Surprise!

and will punish him (cut him in two),/ Acts 1:17, 25, Divided Loyalty! Dichotomesei, 3 Apoc. Bar. 16:3

and put him with the unfaithful./ 12:5, 2 Groups, Active Tyranny = Death/ Hell (1)

b1 And that servant who knew his MASTER'S will, but did not make ready or act according to his will,

2 shall receive a severe beating.

//16:10-12, 20:9-18, Deliberate = Severe Beating/ Yet Saved (2)

c1 But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating,

Not Know, Rom. 2:18, James 4:17, Wisdom 6:6-8

2 shall receive a light beating.

Unintentional = Light Beating/ Yet Saved (3)

Ignorant Sins Less Culpable (Ps. 19:12-13, Dt. 17:12, Num. 15:27-31)

(1') v.48b Principle Of Judgment On What Is Entrusted (Lord's Household).

God + People

Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required;

p.v., Leaders Have Higher/Tougher Standards

and of him to whom men commit much, they will demand the more.

8:10, 11:13, 9:1, 12:32, Warning Of James 3:1

a  
b

## A Brief Treatment Of Luke 12:35-48

The next section in Luke's journey of Jesus to Jerusalem is VIII G, 12:35-59 and falls into three sequential units: 1) vv. 35-40 on perpetual readiness, 2) vv. 41-48 on the judgment of church leaders, and 3) vv. 49-59 on the crises and divisions Jesus brings. This analysis deals with the first two units which are linked in the following ways: 1) the word *Master* (*kurion*) in vv. 36, 37b // vv. 42 [2x], 43, 45, 46, 47; 2) the arrival at an expected day or hour (vv. 39, 40 // v.46); 3) the language of slavery (vv. 37, 38b // vv. 42, 45b) and supervision (vv. 39 // v.42); 4) the formula *amen, I say to you* (v. 37b // v.44); 5) the language of *coming* (vv. 37, 38, 39, 40 // v.45) and *knowing* (v. 39 // v.48). The core imagery is from larger Jewish and Roman estates and households with multiple slaves. Slavery is not defended but assumed from the culture as a fruitful metaphor for the interim between Jesus' ascension and his return to reward the faithful (vv. 37-38, 43-44), punish traitors (vv. 45-46), and discipline but save the slack and ignorant (vv. 47-48). The ethos is thoroughly eschatological; we are to live in light of the end. History has a trajectory and we an appointment. That we know it ahead of times sets us apart from those who live by a different story line.

The first unit (1. vv. 35-40) is a 5:1 concentric structure (a-b-c-b'-a') with the center (c. vv. 37-38) displaying an 8:2 pattern with the inclusion *Blessed are those servants* (v. 37a // v. 38c) and three internal layers: *finds* (2//2'), *when (if) he comes* (3//3'), and at the center (4//4') a formula of authority (*amen, I say to you*) and two actions: *girding* and *servicing*. Structure and content agree; at the end the faithful encounter a Lord who serves his servants, thus turning the world and its priorities upside down after the manner of his kingdom. The dual commands of v. 36 address readiness during the day (*belt cinched*) and night (*lamps lit*). We are to be ready and waiting, alert and attentive. The risen Jesus is always *near* and will one day be *here*. As servants waiting for the Master to come home after a lengthy wedding celebration, they are to remain at the ready. Speaking of himself in the third person (*he will gird himself*), the risen and returned Lord assumes their role as servant. He is and remains the servant of the servants of God. To remain alert in the middle of the night watches is worth a second blessing (v. 38c). The wedding analogy (b. v. 36) is parallel to the thief analogy (b' v. 39) with a different purpose. One is to be welcomed, others (false teachers) kept out. The church has boundaries. Since the hour of arrival is unpredictable, vigilance is continual, "You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming *at an unexpected hour*." Believers live with the inward eye cast upward and refuse those who claim to know more than has been revealed.

The second unit (2. vv. 41-48) is formed as a question from Peter (v. 41) plus the Lord's counterquestion (vv. 42-48). Peter is curious if the teaching is just for the twelve or for all followers. "Is this a leadership or a followership issue?" Jesus refuses a straightforward reply and instead says in effect, "You won't know who it applies to till judgment comes!" Only at the end will it be clear who understood the stewardship and served properly. Jesus' answer has a 4:2 concentric pattern (1-2//2'-1') with a contrast between reward (2. vv. 43-44) and punishment (2' vv. 45-48a) at the center. The frames offer the terms of the trust (1. v. 42) and its high standards (1' v. 48b). Church leaders are entrusted with the management and welfare of Jesus' household. To them *much is given* and *much required*. If, at his surprise return, they are about the work, their stewardship increases dramatically in the phrase *he will set them over all his possessions*. If they misuse authority for violence and self-indulgence, their sentence is to be dismembered and tossed on the trash heap. Two lesser penalties are for the slack (v. 47) and ignorant (v. 48a). Three of the four remain in the master's house; such is his mercy. But one is damned; thus his justice. And so the question is, What kind of pastor or leader am I? Whether with God (v. 48c) or with people (v. 48d), the higher you up the food chain, the higher the expectations and stakes! And for Jesus his people are as important as it gets. Jesus wants his church well-fed and well-protected with servant leaders who are gentle but firm and who pay attention to first things. Is this me? Time remains if a change is needed.

## THE GLORY AND THE GORE

*“... the master of that servant will cut him in two and put him with the unfaithful.”*

Jesus’ promise to church leaders who abuse their trust and God’s people.

LUKE 12:46

Waiting in a steamship office for interviews as a wireless operator, a group of applicants filled the room with such a buzz they didn’t hear the dots and dashes of Morse code coming over the loudspeaker. All were experts; no one heard. About that time another man entered and sat quietly by himself. He then stood quickly, walked into the owner’s office, and a few minutes later came out smiling. “Say,” one of the group called out, “how’d you get in ahead of us?” “One of you would have gotten the job if you’d listened to the message.” “What message?” they asked in surprise. “Why the code,” the man answered, “the dots and dashes over the speaker. “It said: ‘The man I need must always be alert. The one who comes directly to my private office will be placed on one of my ships as wireless operator.’”<sup>1</sup>

Many were present, only one alert and rewarded. There is an attentiveness required of us all, and today we find why it matters every day and at the end when the truth is told and all scores settled by God’s justice and mercy. As the Creed promises with confidence, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end.”<sup>2</sup> It is Jesus who stands at history’s end; our privilege it to know it ahead a time and arrange our lives accordingly. We are to be dressed for action, listening with the inward ear for the Lord’s voice and watching with the inward eye for his signals. We do our daily work on two levels: paying attention to the tasks and keeping the Lord in mind. Psalm 16:8 was David’s discipline, “I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.”

Recently I asked a young man who is on the rebuild, “Do you pray?” He hung

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<sup>1</sup> James Cavanaugh, *The Sower’s Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Nicene Creed, *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 880.

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his head, “It never crosses by mind.”

“Then we must make it cross your mind with a new habit. Before you crank your car to head for work, bow your head and simply say the Lord’s Prayer. You must start somewhere.” Calling God to mind is the most basic of all disciplines: to remember the Lord and not surrender to the amnesia of sin and forget our helper.

It is possible, I am told, for this awareness of nearness to become a habit that changes our perception of all things. We see, and in Paul’s words, *pray without ceasing*.<sup>3</sup> And the one who is always near is the same one who will one day make a sudden appearance; history as we have known it will end as heaven swallows earth in the final transformation with a banquet as one of Jesus’ favorite images for the new reality, “Truly, I say to you,” he said of himself in verse 37, “he will gird himself and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.”<sup>4</sup> All who live in light of that event are wise because it will keep you aware and diligent. Charles Wesley had this mindset; of the seven thousand hymns he wrote, five thousand mention the second coming of Christ. C.S. Lewis had it and wrote, “The greatest thing is to found at one’s post as a child of God, living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.”<sup>5</sup> They had it- this awareness; I want it, and I want it for you: a vibrant alertness that resides just below the surface of every conversation, an awareness Jesus Christ is near and that giving him attention is our primary work. Bob and Michael Benson write:

“WATCH, THEREFORE.” The enormous task is to keep your eyes open, wick trimmed, lamp filled. Even when the bridegroom tarries. Even when all flattens out into triviality. Or the midnight cry will catch you sleeping. The cares of this world are no excuse. Not father, mother, wife, not children. Not fixing formula, scrubbing the toilet, peddling pills or prose... the point is to watch. All the rest is addenda.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 1Thess. 5:17. For a recent treatment of *practicing the presence*, see Gregory Boyd, *Present Perfect: Finding God In The Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). On *The Jesus Prayer* see Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer That Tunes The Heart To God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 3:20; 21.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale 1998), 311.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus* (New York, NY Simon & Schuster, 1996), 599.

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The one who entered history through Mary and now stands over history as crucified and risen Lord will one day meet us at its end, either at our deaths- which is more likely, or at his great interruption of history- which none can predict. Count on it. Live in light of it. Let it rattle you loose from the numbing rhythms of regularity and the hum-drum habits of mindless modern living. That's why it's in the Creeds. It's part of the bare minimum of Christian conviction, a belief we cannot do without. It is a weekly wake-up-call to recite, "He shall come again to judge *the living and the dead*," and that's you and me and all who've lived or will. It's the one time you could say with honesty, "Everyone was there." Meditating on his nearness and arrival will startle you awake from the slumber of sloppy living and add intensity to mundane events. Christ is near, though not yet here on full display. You will meet him. Are you alert? Or have you fallen asleep in the seductive arms of modern comforts? Have you been drugged by this world?

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**What Is Required Of All (vv.35-40)**

Jesus' command for girded loins and lit lamps is aimed at all disciples and uses two word pictures. If you saw someone in first century Palestine with their long outer garments gathered up around the waist and cinched with a belt, you knew something. They were about to do some work or else go somewhere in a hurry. It was called *girding up your loins*, or as we might say, *dressed for action*. And if you walked by a home at one or two in the morning and saw a lamp burning, you knew they were awaiting a late visitor. "So," says Jesus to all his followers, "During the day be ready for work and at night keep the lights on." Our military has readiness problems; so does the church. Too much TV, too little Bible. Too much entertainment, too little prayer. Much diversion, little devotion. So if Jesus and his future rarely crosses your mind and rivets your attention, you're in love with the wrong stuff. You're not alert.

The average American watches TV nearly 30 hours a week. That's 65 days nonstop every year. By high school's end, 360,000 commercials, two million for the average 65 year old. Each is created by smart people who pack ads with powerful images, catchy music and memorable slogans, and most have a primary theme: this product will give you true happiness and deep satisfaction. Based on the world view of commercials, here's how you might rewrite Jesus' beatitudes:

"Blessed are those who fly to luxury vacation spots on tropical islands,

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**Luke 12:35-48** ..... 7

where they lie in chaise lounge chairs, the only two people on an enormous white beach; for they shall be satisfied.”

“Blessed are those who drink much beer, for they shall be surrounded by carefree, football-watching buddies and highly attractive, socially-gifted women in the first half of life; and they shall be satisfied.”

“Blessed are those who have outstanding kids. Verily I say to you, highly blessed are those who have a golden Lab bounding along in slow-motion-video playing with the kids in the park, for they shall be the envy of real families everywhere; and they shall be satisfied.”<sup>7</sup>

It’s not true, and if it is, short-lived and expensive, never quite matching the ad, yet we can’t get enough of this fantasy world. We are being shaped, aren’t we?

With his thumb the hitchhiker says, “You furnish the gas, car, repairs and upkeep, supply insurance, and I’ll ride with you. But if you have an accident, I’ll sue you.” Sounds pretty one-sided, but one wonders how many hitchhikers are in churches. “You go to the meetings, you serve, you tithe, you study, you pray, you visit, you take care of what needs taking care of, and I’ll just go along for the ride. And if things don’t suit my fancy, I’ll complain, criticize, probably get out and hitchhike to another group.”<sup>8</sup> It was spoken to all, not just to few: verse 35, “Let your loins be girded, lamps burning.” Be always ready, alert for a assignment.

It annoyed me as a teenager that my mother would not go to sleep till I was home. I’d sneak in after curfew, turn the lock slowly, pad through the den in my socks. Then, as my feet hit the first step to begin my ascent, I heard *the voice*, “Good night, Son. Glad you made it safely home. Isn’t it a little late?”

She was awake because she loved me, and if your heart is fixed on Jesus Christ it’s for the same reason. Love will keep you awake; love will keep you focused and faithful. Verse 36, “and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him when he comes and knocks.” Jewish weddings often went a full week; no telling when he might return, and that’s

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<sup>7</sup> Preaching.com search under Luke 12:35-48.

<sup>8</sup> Edited, R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Illustrations* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 60.

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the point. How many times has he knocked on the door of your life and no one answered because you were distracted? How many times has he knocked on the door of a church grown dry and no one welcomed him in. Revival is hungering for and praying for the presence, then welcoming Jesus when he knocks, and we need it.

Because we live in a more-or-less egalitarian culture, having someone serve you is not such a big deal. First them, then you. But the language here is *master* and *slave*, and in that culture slaves always serve masters; masters never serve slaves. The one who serves honors the one who is served and so maintains the pyramid of status with everyone locked in place. The fantastic promise is that at his return Jesus will publicly honor those who looked for to his return and lived in light of it. It's the permanent upending of all human hierarchies of power and privilege. With this promise the world as we have known it turns upside-down, "Truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have *them* sit at table, and he will come and serve *them*." God the Son in flesh, the risen Lord, the Boss of the cosmos, the Destroyer of all evil waits on a table at which you are a guest! And if that's how he treats his faithful ones then, what kind of honor and service ought we to be giving one another? If he is to serve you at the banquet of history's climax, why can't I do it now? And if we don't know when he returns, we have to do it all the time, which is precisely the impact of verse 40, "You must also be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour." Ready to serve God's people. It's our call.

Here I want to make a risky aside using Jesus' image of the thief and the householder in verse 39, "But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into." Burglars come to plunder because you have something they want, which in our case is the second largest Protestant denomination in America with its considerable institutional resources built up by our forebears and given us as a sacred trust. What used to be called *the mainline church* is now being internally plundered of its biblical theology and ethics, the tragedy being that most of the faithful and their pastors were totally unprepared for such an assault from within the family. For perhaps a hundred years we thought American culture was our friend and we its respected Christian conscience, but when the culture turned on us we found ourselves in the arms of the wrong lover and severely compromised, our identity weakened through long neglect. Here the Presbyterians and Episcopalians come quickly to mind, and the book is yet to be written how our theological and cultural betters came to this end. At this point the Methodists are teetering with an uncertain future, but perhaps our polity and our theology of holiness and our African delegates will be used to preserve us. To be a

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chaplain to the culture instead of a clear alternative is not our call, attractive as it is to educated clergy and laity who crave elite approval, who want to be *with the times!*

Now the presenting issue is sexual ethics in the redefinition of marriage and standards for ordination, but that’s not the deep issue, only the presenting one, so don’t be diverted by the babble in the culture. The real issue is the binding nature of divine revelation in Scripture and the nature of the Christian message, which is not one of accommodation but transformation and the call to holy living for all. Those who know him, said John, obey his commandments.<sup>9</sup> To locate the voice of the Holy Spirit in the culture’s supposed insights and agenda for liberation, then to use that to trump Scripture and settled church judgments deep in the tradition is dangerous precisely because it’s a false, alternative gospel, but not new. There have always been believers who wanted to justify their large social projects and have it *approved by the church*. The divine right of medieval kings and the slave trade in the south come quickly to mind. Jesus takes us as he finds us, but loves us too much to leave us in the mess. I’m glad he didn’t leave me where he found me; I’m glad he changed the way I treat women; I’m glad he required of me a painful year of repentance and expensive restitution for my crimes; I’m grateful for moral constraints and the sanctions that attend them in Scripture. I’m grateful for the standards of celibacy in singleness and celibacy in heterosexual marriage our Discipline currently requires of clergy precisely because as shepherds we are to model what all are asked to follow.<sup>10</sup>

All are welcome to worship in our churches and come to the Lord’s table; all may ask for pastoral care in their struggles and find a place of service; all our invited to take the solemn vows of membership after instruction, and all are called to walk in the ways of Scriptural holiness and self-control, whatever their struggles. It’s because of God’s holy love that boundaries are set. If I belong to Jesus, I do not have the right to do as I please. A Jesus with a sword in one hand and rod in the other ought to give all pastors and bishops pause every time we preach. The sound of a blade whistling through the air or the crack of a rod across my bare back are not sounds I want to hear. I could be wrong about all this, and if I am, please bring me your wise instruction in the better and more faithful ways you have found.

The truth is that we winked at the sexual revolution of the 60's and offered at

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<sup>9</sup> 1 John 2:3-6.

<sup>10</sup>OD 2012, 776.

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least soft support to the abortion issue of the 70's, as our *Discipline* still reflects. We were *with the times*. Now that the issues are more serious, maybe God is visiting us with a dose of our own medicine as we set our sail to the winds of culture instead of the winds of the Spirit that blow us into the safe harbor of Scriptural Christianity. We are getting more of what we winked at, sponsored, and tolerated. This is what God's wrath looks like as the Lord backs up a half step to see which way we want to go, so that either judgment or grace may fall. Will United Methodists continue in the apostolic faith and moral traditions that lie at the center of historic Christian faith, or will we surrender to the forces of the culture and its obsessions and fantasies about what makes life whole? When we lose confidence in the transforming power of Jesus Christ, what hope is there for any of us sinners, whatever our weakness? We soon become religious social workers and little else. This explains at least in part why our conference has so many do-good projects and so little attention to Scripture, theology, and holiness, the logic being that when doctrine and faith get fuzzy, you keep the saints busy to keep up appearances and justify your existence and apportionments. This is us! And I say it as an insider who pays his dues.

I love my church, but our future's uncertain. Burglars don't always wear masks; sometimes they wear collars and robes and have walls full of prestigious degrees, so urbane and worldly-wise. They sincerely want to rescue some of us from our poor, benighted, un-hip, mean, bigoted, pre-modern, backwards, stodgy, repressive, cruel, out of touch and ultimately unjust biblical beliefs and standards, which some of us count as among the treasures of divine revelation which we promised to defend in our ordination vows. If you want a church that's merely a chaplain to the culture, now's the time to make your voice heard. "I want the world to set the agenda and for the church to go before the parade mumbling prayers and singing hymns." The name for such is syncretism, and only a step from idolatry.

There is a thin piece of rope holding the once-great Methodist ship at its mooring, and if it snaps under pressure or is deliberately sabotaged, we will be adrift. Why not polygamy as the next brave frontier, going boldly, as in Star Trek, to regions unknown? Why not polyamory for pastors? What not any and every variation as a lawful human right that the church must then find way to bless because in this brave new religious landscape there are no boundaries that are not bigotries?

Just what will the Lord say to pastors when we are called to account? We've already been told, haven't we? To be cut in two and numbered with the unfaithful after a lifetime of running a local religious franchise is not what I planned. I might

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survive a severe or light beating for my cowardice and fear of losing my career or pension, but I would not survive the Lord making my divided loyalties public in a personal division of my parts, then to be tossed with the trash. Shall we preserve the treasures for ourselves and future generations, or shall we let them be plundered because we had not the stomach for controversy? You decide. Compromised culture religion: the broad and easy way, or classic Christianity at full theological and moral strength: the narrow way? Which do you want? An even more important question than preference is, Which one saves? As a rule of thumb, I'm suspicious of anything that appeals to the worst in me. In other words, if it's popular and easy, it's probably wrong. If it's hard and demanding and challenges my soul, it's probably right.

So through at least four overlapping images -loins girded, lamps lit, waiting for the master and guarding against the thief- we are commanded to stay at the ready, not to be distracted or unaware of the burglars that encircle our walls or who are already within the gates. "You must also be ready," we are commanded for a second time in verse 40, "for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour," which by the way means that all the speculations of the TV preacher prognosticators with their charts and time lines is foolishness. There is no rapture, no *go-up before the blow-up*; that's American escapism, not faithful witness.<sup>11</sup> It makes people think they have secret knowledge and distracts them from mission. What we now face is foolishness on the right with the fundamentalists and treason on the left with the moral innovators, so where are we to turn? To the deep, radical center. To the Jesus of the Gospels and his demanding teaching on what it means to be his follower, to the full breadth of Scripture, to the historic faith of the church, to its tested moral wisdom and the examples of those before us who bore witness in hard times. Here we stand and invite all, of whatever history and brokenness, to become Jesus' followers and be conformed to his vision of who we are meant to be as a holy and happy people who refuse to follow any agenda but his, despite our personal failings.

This is not something you can do alone; no one can maintain such focus of life by sheer force of will. The imagery is communal, not individual; it is *servants* and *they* and *them*.<sup>12</sup> It is only together that we as a people can retrain the habits of our

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> On the corrosive effects of our current hyper-individualism in church and culture, see Paul Sparks, Tom Soerens, Dwight Friesen, *The New Parish* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2014), 15.

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**Luke 12:35-48 . . . . . 12**

heart and turn them to the Lord again and again and again. He wants our undivided attention and promises to reward it; every time we turn our thoughts to Jesus in private or in public he notices. A old preacher from Scotland once wrote, “If God has really done something in Christ on which the salvation of the world depends, and if He has made it known, then it is a Christian duty to be intolerant of everything which ignores, denies or explains it away.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus Christ must be more than the distant, detached object of faith; he must become the focus of our affections, of our waking and sleeping thoughts. Remember the hymn? “Jesus, the very thought of thee with sweetness fills the breast; but sweeter far thy face to see, and in thy presence rest.”<sup>14</sup> The question to ask at the end of life is not so much, “What have I accomplished?” but “Whom have I loved, and how courageously?”<sup>15</sup> To love Christ in this world and refuse to be distracted takes courage. Try it for a single day and you will see how hard it is and how your need for approval from others keeps pushing him aside. I am embarrassed how quickly and how regularly I forget the Lord. I take comfort he hasn’t forgotten me. I often hear the question, “Who are you looking to, Pastor Phil, and who are you waiting for? Why not look to me?”

**Higher Standards For Pastor Leaders (vv.41-48)**

It was Simon Peter, destined later to be both chief coward and chief pastor, who raised the question in verse 41, “Lord, are you telling this parable *for us* or *for all*?” As was the custom with a good rabbi, Jesus answered with a question and story, leaving Peter to draw his own conclusion. Jesus is comfortable with our freedom.

Our word *economy* comes from the Greek word *oikonomos*, here translated *steward* and refers to the overseer of a large Jewish or Roman household, a head slave over others. It is wrong, as some say in our day to slam the Bible, that it approves slavery. Not so, rather slavery was a fact of the ancient world which God’s people worked within, sought to humanize and ultimately undermine with stories of the Exodus and the teachings of Jesus and Paul. That it was not undone as an institution in this- the land of the free and home of the brave- till a hundred and fifty years ago shows both how enduring it is as an economic fact and how hard some evils are to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>14</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 175.

<sup>15</sup> Geoff Gorsuch, “Journey to Adelpheos,” *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 14.

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correct. Jesus uses the imagery since all believers are slaves of a God who owns us all. And when the master was away and so invisible- as Jesus is after his ascension- a householder was appointed. The analogy to the Lord's absence and return is fitting. But when he returns, there's no more need for stewards, here understood between the lines as *pastors or church leaders, including laity*. Ours is an interim assignment. But if wise and faithful, the steward cares for the welfare of the household as if it was his own, making sure each is fed through Word and Table, Pastoral Care, and Training. Planning, management, leadership, teamwork and individual attention are all required, all the while knowing none of the resources are your own. This is not my church. It is a great trust to care for someone else's household, even temporarily. We entrust our infants to babysitters, our bodies to doctors, our children to school teachers, and our spiritual oversight to pastors as a sacred trust. And if it's betrayed or discharged sloppily, we are justifiably angry, something this church knows something about from its painful history. "And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household slaves, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?'" Who is it? And the answer is, We don't know who's wise and faithful till the end. It's why Jesus didn't give a list but told a story about outcomes.

Jesus asked a question. Where do we find people who will care for the household of God, shepherd the flock, equip the saints, teach Scripture, comfort the dying, pray for the sick, rebuke the careless, pray for us when we cannot pray for ourselves, and lead lives of integrity and service? Not perfection, at least not yet, but faithfulness. If the ordained ministry of the church is weak and careless; if it's blown about by the spirit of the age, it's only because the church that shaped them is in the same condition. Pastors don't drop out of the sky; they come from the pews in which you are seated as God stirs a man or woman to take the training and apprenticeship necessary for that office, and for us it's four years of college, three years of seminary, then three years of supervision before ordination. It's a privilege and, if done well, the hardest work I know. We are now adrift, embattled, and teetering on apostasy, and we pastors are first in line for judgment. When did *United Methodist* come to mean not much of anything? It's not enough to guard the institution and keep apportionments coming in when the faith itself is at stake. Where are the prophets? Where are the voices of protest? It's getting embarrassing these days to be a United Methodist minister with such a vacuum at the top. There are nights I don't sleep well. The Lord's question still stands, "*Where? Where* then is the faithful and wise bishop whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?" Why so silent? I tell you why: We're all afraid of what's ahead.

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When I'm alone, when it's quiet, when the phone's not ringing and the to-do list out of sight, I pray, "Don't let me sell you out or sell you short Keep me from being a traitor or a coward because you know both those are within me." There's fear in that prayer, as there ought to be, because the verses that follow the Lord's question lay out the glory and the gore of Christian leadership.

First the glory, verse 43: "Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over *all his possessions*." He owns it all and promises to share the rule of it not with Presidents, not with Kings and Queens, but with Pastors who cared for his people. We are in the midst of a political season that will consume much of our attention over the next two years, but I tell you that pastors have more accountability before God than any Senator or President. We are spiritual gatekeepers, and God Almighty promises to hold us to a high standard. Now you know why I'm afraid and why I do not recommend this job as a career for anyone. It's not for the fainthearted and if I'd known the full cost I think I would have looked for another path. But in my youthful naivete I answered a call, and the Caller has every right to warn me of treason. I do not intend to take my hand from the plough till my row is finished, but I cry and sweat and tremble often. At times I find myself making mental plans, What if they kick me out? I stand on the doors of homes and hospital rooms and pray, "Lord Jesus, go before me." When is the last time you looked a man or woman eye to eye and said, "This is sin; stop it!" It's a glorious calling and always a minority report; without encouragements that come from God I'd quit and go into hiding tomorrow.

Now the gore. Those who misuse the authority of the church to level personal scores or pursue a life of self-indulgence are in for a surprise. "Beat the servants and get drunk and naked" is not the job description. Those who think accountability is far off and that there's plenty of time to mend their ways are in for a painful surprise. What happened to Baker and Swaggart years ago is only a sneak preview of what's ahead if God examines the clergy as a prelude to a general awakening. But better to be exposed and embarrassed now than judged later. The RSV translation "and will *punish* him" in verse 46 is pitifully weak; the translators wimped out, maybe to protect the clergy union or pretend God cannot be so brutal as this. The Greek verb means *to cut in two*, to dichotomize, to slice and dice, draw and quarter. *Punish* is much too weak; it sounds remedial which it is not in this case. "But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know,

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and will *cut him in two* and put him with the unfaithful.” Where are the stained glass windows of Jesus with a sword in one hand and a rod in the other wading through the United Methodist General Conference?

The principle is what pastors do to the church, the Lord will do to them. Betray the faith, and you will be betrayed. Fleece the flock, and you will be fleeced by God. Fail to protect, and there will be no one to protect you. Show no mercy, and you will be shown none. Carve up the church for gain, and you will be carved in pieces. Use unholy anger to hurt people? The Lord will use holy anger to hurt you. Forget to feed others the Word? You will be fed to the fire. We set the terms of our judgment. The Lord’s own brother James put it this way, “Let not many of you become teachers, brethren, knowing that we will receive the greater condemnation.”<sup>16</sup> He didn’t say *not any*, just *not many*. It’s a good thing for the church to face a clergy shortage.

Deliberate malpractice is a serious offense. Even if you allow for the excess of oriental hyperbole and exaggeration to make a point, the language is clearly meant as a warning, not to you so much but to the likes of me. Pastors are not to be envied. Our possible reward is great, but so is the possibility of grave punishment according to the principle of verse 48, “Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much, they will demand the more.” God has placed us as stewards in his house; he has entrusted us with those for whom Jesus came; it’s not to be trifled with. The ignorant pastor will receive a light beating but be saved; the lazy one who knew better but did not do better will receive a heavy beating and be saved, but the pastor who commits the offenses listed in verse 45 in high-handed tyranny will be taken apart and put with the unfaithful, which is just another name for hell. So when you drive by a church of any stripe or brand, pray for the pastor. And if you hear one has fallen, do not gossip but grieve. A soldier has taken a hit in the heat of battle. Pray he or she repent and be restored, that their scars serves as a sober reminder to others. I tremble every Annual Conference when we read the names of pastors who’ve been booted out on charges. At first I didn’t pay much attention, but then later when the names of some I looked up to and then the names of classmates popped up, I sobered up. It’s a good fear.

Three years ago an event happened I will not forget. A former pastor stopped by, one I greatly admired before he messed up and cashed out. Doctor’s degree, gifted, witty, a man who had great impact on my father during an Emmaus weekend.

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<sup>16</sup> James 3:1.

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My dad had a deep personal renewal of faith in his 70's and this man had a big role. With tears I shared my gratitude. He then got up, knelt before me, bowed his head and began to cry. "Will you forgive me for breaking our covenant and for bringing shame on the name of Jesus and his church? I always looked up to you, but never told you." I was dumbfounded since I always considered him up the food chain from me in terms of promise. I did three things. I said, "I forgive you." I then put my hand on his head and spoke the words of absolution we use after confession, "Almighty God have mercy upon you...." I got on my knees beside him, hugged him, and said, "It could be me, you know." This is not what Jesus was talking about. There's always enough mercy for repentance. I don't remember getting much done the rest of the day, and I'm sobered every time I remember that morning. I am more like than unlike my friend, and I await the good God will do with his broken servant. Perhaps he came as much for my protection as his forgiveness. Maybe I needed a warning.

I've been given much. Christian home, parents who loved each other, a living faith, great schooling, a precious wife, good health, a calling, a church to serve. It's me he warns, "Every one to whom much is give, of him will much be required." I live an indebted life, and one day the One I follow will ask and answer a question, Do you care for my household in ways honest and gentle? Did you model what you taught? My answer? "Only you know, O Lord." I will then hear his verdict, and here the final stanza of a Wesley hymn come to mind, "Help me to watch and prayer, and on thyself rely, assured if I my trust betray, I shall forever die."<sup>17</sup> I have the current assurance of salvation by the Spirit's internal witness, but I am not a Calvinist.

### CONCLUSION

If it were not Jesus saying these things, one whose every word is certified by resurrection, we would have reason to doubt their severity. I'm left with a question: What kind of church are we becoming in light of this future? How about you? Do Jesus and his people have first place? Are anger and getting your way ruling your life? How can we *play church* or *play at life* after facing such strong words. Let the Holy Spirit sober you, and made God have mercy on us all, but me first! We're all accountable, and some are more accountable than others. Holy fear is good. It's Mother's Day. I love my mother the church, and I am to guard her reputation and her children since it was in her womb that I found life and was born again. What could be more embarrassing for her than to have a late-in-life moral meltdown?

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<sup>17</sup> *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 413.

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