The Parable of the Watchful Servants

Luke 12: 35-48

DIG: What is the relationship between the watchfulness of this passage and the worry of Luke 12:22-34? What are the major concerns of these passages? Why does Peter ask the question in verse 41? Why does Yeshua answer as He does? Why does Christ say that they should be ready in verses 39-40? Who is the thief? What should be the attitude and actions of the faithful and wise manager in verses 42-43? What could tempt the manager to do wrong in verse 45? How does the Lord Himself summarize this passage in verse 48? How would the apostles have interpreted it?

REFLECT: About what dangers is Jesus warning you in these verses? Which danger is most likely to be a problem for you? What has God entrusted to you as His manager? If you knew that in 30 day’s time the Lord was returning, what would you do to get things ready for inspection?

In this section Messiah told two parables (verses 35-40 and 42-48) to His inner circle of apostles, which were joined by a question from Peter (verse 41). The second parable expands and explains the first. Although there is a sense in which these parables are quite applicable with respect to death, Luke’s main point involves the Second Coming. This is clear from the use of the well-known image of the thief coming in the middle of the night. On the day before His death, Yeshua reemphasized the issue of watchfulness to the Twelve (see Jv - The Parable of the Faithful and Wicked Servants).

The one main point to the parable of the watchful servants is that we need to be in a constant state of watchfulness and readiness for the Lord’s return.

Instruction in Watchfulness: The Lord now gave His apostles an exhortation to watchfulness. He likened them to servants attending their master. They were to be ready to serve at any time. Thus Yeshua encouraged them to be dressed and to keep their lamps burning. Be dressed ready for service, literally stand, your waist having been belted. This image of a man who has tucked his long robe up under his belt in order to run is found frequently in the Bible. The use of the perfect participle, having your waist belted, portrays someone who, instead of waiting until the last moment, is always prepared to act. And keep your lamps burning (Luke 12:35).
To impress this on them, He used the imagery of a wedding feast. The time of the wedding feast was not determined. When it would begin, no one knew. So the master's return time would be undetermined. The picture, then, was of servants waiting for their master (Greek: kyrios) to return from a wedding feast. This wedding feast is not the wedding feast of the Lamb (see my commentary on Revelation Fg - Blessed Are Those who are Invited to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb), because here the master returns to his servants after the feast.

When he returned he would expect them to be ready to minister to him. So that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. If those servants were indifferent to their responsibilities, they would put out their lamps and go to bed. But it will be good, literally blessed, for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, literally amen, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table, referring to the wedding feast of the Lamb above, and will come and wait on them (Luke 12:36-37). On the night He was betrayed, Yeshua washed the feet of His talmidim (see Kh - Jesus Washes His Disciples Feet). Because this is a parable, the details cannot be pressed. So here Luke uses symbolic language to say that those who are found faithful when Jesus returns will be honored.

The night guards in the Temple in Jerusalem were placed in twenty-four stations about the gates and courts. Of those, twenty-one were occupied by Levites alone; the other innermost three jointly by priests and Levites (the watch at some of the gates seems at one time to have been hereditary to certain families). Each guard consisted of ten men; so that in all two hundred and forty Levites and thirty priests were on duty every night. The Temple guards were relieved more frequently by day, but not during the night. Hence, when Yeshua said: Whether he comes in the second watch, or even the third, and finds them awake, he will reward those who are ready (Luke 12:38 NASB), He was specifically referring to the second and third watches as those of deepest sleep.1041

Christ then gave a second illustration of watchfulness. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into, literally dug through. This suggests a mud brick Palestinian house. The thief's coming was a common image in the early Church for the Second Coming (First Thessalonians 5:2-4; Second Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3 and 16:15). Then the Lord applied His teaching: You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (Luke 12:39-40). This teaching was based on the fact that the Kingdom offered Isra'el had been rejected. Thus, it had to be postponed until a future time. Jesus' servants would be found watching, waiting, and prepared in view that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5) would return again.1042
Instruction in Faithfulness: Yeshua did not answer Peter’s question directly. Instead these verses indicate that He was talking primarily about pharisaic Judaism of His day. The religious leaders were supposed to be managing the nation for God until He brought in the messianic Kingdom. The Lord answered: Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk (Luke 12:42-45).

However, they failed at their task. They were not looking expectantly toward the Kingdom. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. The degree of punishment will be determined by the privileges assigned to each person and the knowledge that has been revealed to him or her. In this parable the one who knew the master’s will and was faithless because of the postponement of the master’s return will be cut to pieces, literally cut in two, and assigned a place with the unbelievers. In Jeremiah 34:18 this was the punishment for those who had broken covenant with Adonai by mistreating their Hebrew slaves. The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows (Luke 12:46-47). Since this was the most severe penalty, Christ must not have been speaking about believers who were not ready. He is referring to the nation’s leaders who will be present at the Great White Throne Judgment (see my commentary on Revelation Fo – The Great White Throne Judgment).1043

But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. Privilege brings responsibility and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked (Luke 12:48). The degree of light or knowledge one has, determines the measure of responsibility and, consequently, the degree of reward or punishment.

In anticipation of their master’s return from a wedding feast, the servants had dressed in proper attire, prepared food, cleaned the house, lit the lamps so that he could easily find his way home, and stationed themselves so that they could immediately respond to his needs. It was very late and they were tired, but none of them fell asleep or shirked their duties. Finally, the master knocked! Eager to care for him, they immediately opened the door and welcomed him in. And for being prepared for his return he honored them.
How blessed those servants would feel! Their master had treated them with love and compassion, enabling them to love him in return. This parable reflects our lives as servants of the great Master, Yeshua Messiah. He has called each of us to serve Him in preparation for that great day when we will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the clouds (First Thessalonians 4:13-18).

As servants, will we indulge ourselves in our Master's absence, or will we stand alert, ready to do His bidding? Jesus is eager to reward those who have labored in His absence and are awake and ready when He returns (see my commentary of Revelation Cc - For We Must All Appear Before the Judgment Seat of Christ). The Shield of our Salvation is a loving redeemer and protector unlike any earthly master we will ever know. King though He is, Yeshua performed the ultimate act of service: He laid down His life on the cross so that we could be united with Him forever.

Our Master's return will be a glorious day for those who believe in Him and know Him as their Lord and Savior. On that day, He will acknowledge our faith and any good works on His behalf. He will embrace His faithful servants, saying, "Come, refresh your souls, partake in My wedding feast, and share in My joy. Sit down and I will wash the dirt of earthly trials, suffering, and hardship from your feet, anoint you with costly oil, and clothe you in My pure white garments of righteousness."

Lord, help me to serve You faithfully so that on that last Day, I may receive the greatest of all rewards . . . the fullness of joy in Your presence.