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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XLIV. Lamps Burning, Dressed for Action**  
**Luke 12:35-48**

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When it comes to the Second Coming of Jesus, Christians seem to divide into two distinct groups. One group seems to think about the Second Coming far too much. It becomes an obsession – scanning Scripture for secret clues as to when it will be, constructing end-times charts to lay it all out, scanning the daily news for signs that the day is close at hand. And then there is the second group—and this group is made up of those who think far too little about the Second Coming. It's simply not on their radar at all – a matter of indifference to their daily living out of the faith. Probably, most of us are in the second group.

Well, according to Jesus this morning, both groups are getting it wrong. Wrong in important and consequential ways. To those of us who think far too little about His return, Jesus says, *"You also must be ready."* And to those who think far too much about His return, Jesus says, *"For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* In other words, the Second Coming is something which has an important place in the living out of our faith daily. But, on the other hand, being obsessed over when it will come is not at all what Jesus means by being ready for when He comes. So what then is the proper way to think about the Second Coming? And what is the proper way to get ready now for that day when it will occur? That is what our passage this morning is all about – Jesus teaching His disciples then, and us now, what it means to be ready for Him when He comes again.

Jesus gives us this teaching in the form of two parables. The first parable concerns servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. And *"Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes,"* says Jesus. Wedding feasts, back in those days, were some serious celebrations – often lasting days. So the servants back home really couldn't be sure when the master would return. And thus they needed to remain ready to receive him until at last he did arrive. Says Jesus, therefore, *"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning."* But what does that actually mean?

Two things, I think. *"Stay dressed for action"* refers specifically to the sort of clothing that was worn in Jesus' day. Back in that day, everyone wore long robes, both men and women. These robes nearly touched the ground and were loose-fitting – which made them quite appropriate for that climate. But, because these robes nearly scraped the ground, in order to do any serious labor you first had to belt up your robe – hoist it up a bit to get it off the dirt, and then tie a belt or rope around your waist to keep it in place. Then, with your robe out of the way, you would be

ready to get started with whatever needed to be done. And that's what Jesus is referring to when He instructs us to "*stay dressed for action.*"

But how then does that idiom, "*stay dressed for action,*" translate into our modern living? I think it means, simply, that we are to think about Jesus' Second Coming on a regular basis – that it is meant to enter into our ordinary ways of thinking and even reorder and alter those ways of thinking. Enter into our thinking in such a way that this great event, which we tend to think of as way out there somewhere way over the horizon of our daily lives, draws closer to us so that we learn to think of it as something which has an important affect upon our daily lives right now, here and today. Most human beings, according to studies, are rather short-term in their outlook and decision making – we make decisions based on our immediate circumstances and out of a regard for what we think will provide the most immediate benefit in those circumstances. We are not as good in our daily decision making at taking into account our longer-term goals and the longer-term consequences of the short-term decisions we make today. Now, that's not necessarily bad, in and of itself. But what Jesus is telling us when He says, "*Stay dressed for action,*" is that it's not the best way to keep ourselves on track for the Kingdom.

Instead, to "*stay dressed for action*" means to alter the horizon of our thinking by allowing consideration of the Second Coming of Christ to enter into both our short-term decision-making, as well as our long-term goals and plans – so that we don't get off track at any point in relation to His return, and so remain ready for whenever He comes. To "*stay dressed for action*" is to remember that our lives are meant for more than whatever it is we are doing and experiencing right now and today and tomorrow – and that our lives right now and today and tomorrow and forevermore have God as their ultimate destiny. It is to push back the horizons of our decision-making, so that each significant life decision is made not only in light of our normal this-world concerns, but also in light of how each decision affects our next-world destiny in light of the coming Kingdom of God.

In our daily business, buying and selling – remembering that we answer ultimately to Him in all these things. In our family life, nurturing and caring – and remembering that He is the One from whom our love springs and to whom our love must ultimately return. In our social lives, meeting and greeting – remembering that what we do or fail to do for even the least of our brothers and sisters we do or fail to do for Him, as He will reveal to us on that day when He comes again. To "*stay dressed for action*" is to have our minds wrapped around the truth that, as Paul puts it, "*each of us will one day give an account of himself to God.*"<sup>1</sup> Or, as the eighteenth-century English priest, William Law, put it in his Christian classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*:

*He, therefore, is the devout man who . . . considers God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety, by doing everything in the Name of God, and under such rules as are conformable to His glory.*<sup>2</sup>

To be dressed for action for the Second Coming of Jesus, we have to think from time to time about the fact that there will indeed be a Second Coming of Jesus – and so let that knowledge shape our daily thinking and deciding now. Because, every day, by the decisions we make and the actions

we take, we are slowly moving ourselves either closer to, or farther from, being “dressed for action” on the day He comes.

Which leads us directly to that second instruction Jesus gives, that of “*keeping our lamps burning*.” Again, this is an idiomatic saying, with a meaning particular to that time and place. It is hard for us moderns to imagine what it was to live in a world where there was no electricity. Lamps, in such a time, were critical – what little light a lamp could offer was nonetheless, back then, potentially the difference between life and death. And so Jesus tells His disciples to “*keep your lamps burning*” – meaning get them lit before the darkness comes, and keep them lit all through the night, until the morning comes. Lest the master find total darkness instead of the warm light of welcome when he returns.

What does it mean, then, for us moderns to keep our lamps burning in light of the Second Coming of Jesus? It means to be found doing the good works Jesus has asked us to do for Him. Remember what Jesus said to us in His Sermon on the Mount: “*You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*”<sup>3</sup> To keep our lamps burning is to do the good works which bring God’s own light into the darkness of this world. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, is getting at this same thing when he tells us to “*cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*”<sup>4</sup> One preacher, reading Paul, offers us this interpretation:

*Every step we take in this world is a step toward either darkness or light. Every harsh word, every mean act, every vengeful thought is a part of the works of darkness. Every act of forgiveness, every small act of charity, every temptation resisted is a piece of the armor of light.*<sup>5</sup>

So, to “*keep our lamps burning*” is to do the things Christ has called us to do, as we await the day of His return. I can think of a thousand illustrations of what this looks like, and so can you. But here’s just one, one picture of what it looks like to keep our lamps burning in light of the Second Coming of Jesus. It’s something Debra Rienstra, who teaches at Calvin College, wrote about her mother – about seeing the goodness and glory of God reflected in the ordinary daily living of her mother:

*When I think of all the cards my mother has sent to senior citizens living in the nursing home, all the cakes she has baked for people to comfort them as they grieved and planned a funeral, all the little goody bags of practical supplies she has dropped off on the doorsteps of struggling families, I see a string of tiny lights stretching across her life, so many that together they give off a dazzling brightness. I recently attended two funerals of my mother’s good friends. On both occasions, when I greeted the deceased person’s grown children, all they could say to me, through their tears, was how grateful they were for all my mother had done for their families. They’re not talking about anything spectacular; Mom never loaned them large sums of money or anything. But she showed*

*up again and again even at the unattractive moments, often joining her friend Shirley, for example, when she went to the Alzheimer's care unit to help feed her husband his supper. Such deeds seem precious to those who receive them.*<sup>6</sup>

*"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* And how are we to be ready? By staying dressed for action and keeping our lamps burning – meaning to let the fact that Jesus **is** one day coming again enter into the ways we think and make decisions in our lives right now; and, specifically, by then letting that new and reordered mindset drive us to do the good works Jesus has called us to do while we are waiting for Him to come again. We let the fact of Jesus' Second Coming alter the way we think about our lives, and also then direct and shape the way we live out our lives, so that we will be ready, when He comes.

Which brings us to the second parable Jesus tells, that of the household manager who is unfaithful to the master's instructions while the master is away. This parable does not need a lot of explanation – it's meaning and intent is pretty clear: it's a rather stiff warning from Jesus about the consequences of not being prepared for Jesus' Second Coming – of being found, when He returns, not dressed for action and with lamps no longer burning for Him. *"Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes,"* Jesus says in verse 43. But the heart of this second parable is in the verses which follow, in which the servant decides instead to use the master's absence as an opportunity to live it up, exploit others, and in short live a life of self-serving, master-disobeying sin. Says Jesus, *"The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful . . . that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will."* There are consequences – dare we believe that? There are consequences – for remember, it is Jesus Himself speaking these words to us. There are consequences in living our lives as if Jesus were not coming again, consequences for using this interval of waiting for His return to live our lives in service to our worst selves instead of in service to Him and to others, consequences for ignoring the fact that Jesus really is coming again – and so being unready, unprepared when that day comes. It is a warning, a serious and rather frightening warning – the kind we really don't like to hear. But it is a warning from Jesus that we ignore at our own peril. And it gives new urgency to that verse we started with: *"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."*

But if that warning is the stick regarding our being ready for Jesus to come again, is there also a carrot? Indeed there is. It's back in the first parable – and, culturally speaking, it is such an unexpected twist in the story in light of that time and culture that it is clear Jesus intends that we should not overlook it. It's in verse 37. When the master returns and finds His servants ready – dressed for action and with lamps burning – he does the most amazing thing. He, the master, then serves his servants: *"Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them reclining at table, and he will come and serve them."* In other words, indeed, *"Blessed are those servant whom the master finds awake when he comes."* There is, indeed, a reward for our faithfulness in preparing for Jesus' return. If the wicked servant will be punished, the faithful servant will meet with a reward beyond all imaging.

The master will set the table for his faithful servants and then serve his faithful servants a feast. Having been away at a wedding feast, the master will spread before his servants a wedding feast of their own. It is an image which points directly to another passage of Scripture – specifically to Revelation 19, when God grants John a vision of what that heavenly banquet following the return of Jesus will be:

*Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,*

*Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready;  
it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure —*

*for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.  
And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who  
are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”<sup>7</sup>*

Jesus is coming again – and we ignore that truth now to our great peril then. Jesus is coming again – let us, therefore, stay dressed for action and keep our lamps burning. Jesus is coming again – and blessed indeed shall be those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 14:12.

<sup>2</sup> William Law, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:14-16.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 13:12.

<sup>5</sup> Fleming Rutledge, “The Advent Life for Nonheroic People,” in Advent (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> Debra Rienstra, So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 19:6-9.