

Series: *The Parables of Jesus*

The Parable of the Serving Master

Luke 12:35-38 (ESV)

35 *“Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning,*
36 *and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they*
may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.
37 *Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will*
dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.
38 *If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!*

Last week we focused on the parable of the rich fool. We learned that Jesus used the parable as a warning to be on guard against all forms of covetousness and greed. We remember Jesus’ words (12:15) that a person’s “life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” The value of human life is wrapped up in physical possessions. The pitiable man in the parable was rich toward himself but his soul was utterly in poverty toward God. He had stored up earthly treasures but he had failed to store up heavenly treasure. The last verses Iain read was 32-34.

Luke 12:32-34

32 *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*
33 *Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow*
old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.
34 *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

Jesus is instructing His disciples to stop seeking earthly treasures that fade and fail and are stolen. He instead, tells them to seek heavenly treasure that does not fade or fail and can never be stolen. He then very pointedly notes that the treasure He’s talking about relates to the heart and what we love.

Then, immediately following this verse, Luke records a small parable that isn’t recorded in of the other gospels and can be easily overlooked. It is our parable for this morning and is found in verses 35-38. One might even be tempted not to call it a parable. However Peter referred to it as such in verse 41.

Luke 12:41

Peter said, “Lord are you telling this parable for us or for all?”

There are actually two parables in verses 35-40. The first is in verses 35-38. The second is in verses 39-40. **Both parables compare those who are ready for the coming of the Son of Man with those who are not ready.** This morning I’d like us to focus only on verses 35-38. This parable is a great encouragement to be ready by offering a breath-taking promise to those who are.

This brief parable contains an unexpected analogy, which I pray will humble and bless your heart like it did mine. It contains an incredible truth that should change the way we think about servant hood and cause us **to praise Jesus with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength**. This parable is about serving disciples and a serving Master. In this parable the Master becomes a servant as He Himself serves His servants in an amazing and unexpected role reversal.

Looking For Messiah To Be Revealed (the First Time)

From our vantage point in history we stand on the other side of Christ's resurrection than did these original hearers. When we read this parable, we who believe that Jesus will come again as He promised, instantly think of His **second** coming. However, the original hearers would not have had this in mind. The original hearers were looking for Messiah to be revealed for the **first** time. Please keep this in mind.

Stay Dressed for Action (v.35)

Jesus begins this parable with the charge to **stay dressed for action**. Literally the text says, "Let your loins be girded."¹ The customary dress for the day was long, loose fitting robes. The hot climate was easier to endure with loose fitting clothes. However, when it was time to work or travel, the long robes could often get in the way.

To allow for greater mobility (for working, walking, or running), they would tie a rope or a belt around the waist and tuck the hem of the robe up into it keeping it out of the way. This was how God had commanded Israel to be dressed on the night of Passover. They were to eat and be ready to travel in order to quickly leave Egypt.

Exodus 12:11

In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover.

The servant who is prepared will have his belt on, dressed, and ready to go. "The person who wears a long robe, without a belt, is not equipped to travel or prepared to get to work."² Paul refers to this same preparedness for the one who puts on the whole armor of God in Eph. 6:14 "having fastened on the belt of truth..." The belt of truth is first on his list.

Keep Your Lamps Burning (v.35)

Jesus then stresses that a servant who is prepared will **keep his lamp burning**. The charge is to avoid letting the lamp go out. The reason this is important is because it's extremely hard to light a lamp in the dark.

This is hard for us to imagine because we have so many lights on even at night that it is never really dark. In our houses, even at night, light from the street flows in from outside, the computer is on, the light in the fish tank is on, our digital clocks give off light, so there is almost always some light from somewhere that provides us just enough light to see how to get around.

¹ Young's Literal Translation.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008) p. 369.

However, there was a very different situation in the first century. There were no streetlights, night-lights, digital clocks, computers, or fish tanks. If the lamp went out it was extremely difficult to light again. It is much easier to put forth the effort to ensure that does not go out. Be diligent. *Keep your lamps burning.* Today He might say, “Keep your batteries fresh.”

Men Expecting Their Master (v.36)

Jesus then says,

Luke 12:36

“Be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.”

Now we get a fuller picture of what’s happening. The reason why keeping the lamps burning is so important is that the master is away and will return at night. He is at a wedding feast and the exact hour of His return is unknown. Middle Eastern weddings usually lasted a week.³ We are not told how far the master had to travel or how long he stayed. The point is this; *the time of his return is unknown and the servants need to be ready.*

Be Like Men Who Are Waiting (Expectantly)

Jesus is commending a kind of ‘expectant waiting.’ He is saying, “...wait like men *expecting* their master to return...” The Greek word for waiting is προσδέχομαι *prosdéchomai* and means “to remain in a place and/or state, with expectancy concerning a future event.”⁴

The Watchers Waiting Behind the Glass Doors

The kind of waiting Jesus is commending here is an active, expectancy that is alertly looking forward to the master’s return. It’s the kind of waiting I used to see in the eyes of my three, four, and five year olds when I would pull into the driveway (at 485 Park Ave, Woolrich, PA) and they would watch me from behind the sliding glass doors – just waiting for me to get out of the car, come up the steps, and come through the door so they could leap on me and attack me wrestle me to the ground in joyful reunion. That’s the kind of waiting Jesus is commending.

Jesus tells his listeners to **be like men who are looking forward to the return of their master.** They are *eagerly awaiting* his return. They are not taking advantage of the master being gone. These servants did not throw a party to celebrate the fact that their master was gone. These servants stayed up all night looking forward to the time their master would return!

The Return of The Master: When He Breaks Away

The verb translated ‘come home from’ is one word in the Greek. The word ἀναλύω *analyō* means ‘to untie or loosen, to break away from⁵ with an emphasis upon the return’ (to move back to a point or

³ Colin G. Kruse, *John*, in *Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Vol 4*, ed. by Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) p. 91.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

⁵ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Lk 12:35-38.

area from which one has previously departed, but with more explicit emphasis upon the return⁶). The emphasis is upon his return home, not upon the wonderful celebration from which he departed. The word draws attention to the place to which he returned.

The ‘wedding feast’ appears to be singular in English. However, in Greek the word is plural and probably refers to the several days of feasting that went on. Putting all this together, this may mean the master ‘broke away’ from the multiple feasts *before* the weeklong celebrations were completed.

Joseph Fitzmyer writes that the text literally says, “Whenever he breaks loose from the wedding celebrations.”⁷ (This interpretation is supported in Arabic and Syriac translations.⁸) This causes us to wonder why he chose to leave before all the celebrations were completed? Why did he want to return home when there was such a great party going on? The answer probably lies in the fact that there is a special and unusual relationship between this master and his servants.

Ready to Open the Door

Notice these servants loved their master. They loved him more than sleep. They were losing sleep because they were awake watching for him to return. They wanted to please him by being at the door ready to receive him *more* than they wanted to sleep. There would be time to sleep *after* their master returned safely home, but while he was away, it was not a time to sleep.

Open the Door At Once: At the First Knock

These servants were not glad to see the master go away. They couldn’t wait until he returned! These servants are in such a state of readiness they wanted to open the door for him at the first knock. Jesus says they are ready and waiting *so that they may open the door at once*. They did not want to keep their master waiting at all. As soon as they heard the slightest sound, they wanted to ready to open the door.

When He Comes And Knocks

Another question comes to mind. Why does the master knock? It’s his house. Why does he not just go in? There are probably two reasons. First, his return is at night. It could be that he did not want to awaken the others in the house who are sleeping. Second, we must remember that this is the first century. The door would have been barred from the inside. The master didn’t pull out his Kwikset key and slide it into the deadbolt. There would have been wooden board across the door on the inside that the servants would have had to remove for the door to be opened.

Peter Knocked at the Door

This happened to Peter (see Acts 12:12-16). On the night before his scheduled execution an angel delivered him from prison. Peter then went to the house of Mary the mother of John-Mark where the church was gathered praying for him. Peter knocked at the door (Acts 12:13). The servant, Rhoda, went to see who it was. When she recognized Peter’s voice in her excitement she forgot to unbar the door and returned to the prayer meeting announcing that Peter was there. Peter could not enter without the door being unbarred from the inside.

⁶ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

⁷ Bailey, p. 370.

⁸ Ibid.

Blessed Are Those Servants (v.37)

We get another hint at this special relationship between master and servants in the first sentence of verse 37. Jesus says,

Luke 12:37a

“Blessed are those servants [lit. ‘bondservants’] whom the master finds awake when he comes.

The word for servants here is δοῦλος *doulos*. It means “pertaining to a state of being completely controlled by someone or something—‘subservient to, controlled by.’”⁹ These servants are not hired servants that we might think of. They are not paid staff. They are slaves who are owned by the master. They are the “lowest of the low.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, Jesus says these slaves are ‘blessed.’ The Greek word is μακάριος *makarios* and means to be ‘fortunate or blessed;’¹¹ it “denotes a state of happiness.”¹² It does not refer to a future state of happiness, but to one that already exists.¹³ So these slaves already have a good relationship with their master. This explains their eagerness to remain alert and awake as they await his return.

The Serving Master (v.37)

This then leads us to the most shocking part of the parable, the second sentence of verse 37. This sentence would have utterly stunned the hearers. Jesus introduces an idea that never would have even entered into the mind of those who were listening.

Truly, I Say To You

We know this is something we ought to pay attention to because Jesus uses the word ‘amen’ or ‘truly.’

Luke 12:37b

37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.

Jesus says the master will serve the slaves who have been waiting for him. ‘Truly,’ he says, ‘truly’ the master will dress himself for service and have the slaves recline and **he** will come and serve them???

This is amazing! This shocking role reversal is absolutely unexpected. We find Old Testament precedent for master’s serving their guests (eg. Abraham serving the three men/angels in Gen 18:1-8) but nowhere do we find master’s serving slaves!!!

He Will Dress Himself

‘He will dress himself for service.’ Literally the text says, “He will gird himself.” So those slaves who had ‘girded their waists’ and were “dressed for action” (v.35) now find their own master girding his waist, and dressing in order to serve them! The master takes off the beautiful wedding robe he had

⁹ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

¹⁰ Bailey, p. 372.

¹¹ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

¹² D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., 143 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

¹³ Bailey, p. 372.

on, he lays it aside, puts on a serving robe, belts up the hem of the robe, and prepares to wait upon his slaves. Those slaves, who were eagerly waiting up to serve their master when he returned home, now find their master preparing to serve *them*! Can we even imagine their thoughts?

He Will Have Them Recline At Table

After the master ‘girds & dresses’ himself for service, he has the slaves **recline at table**. Evidently this takes a little effort. The Greek word is ἀνακλίνω *anaklinō*, which means ‘to cause to recline to eat.’¹⁴

No doubt these slaves protested this unexpected role reversal. They would **not** have been comfortable at all with the idea of their master serving them. So he has to ‘*cause them to recline*’ at table to eat. He probably had to say, “Just sit down and relax! That’s an order.”

Peter’s Protest

Remember Peter’s protest when Jesus came to wash his feet? Peter is utterly stunned at the sight of Jesus kneeling before him (John 13:4-9). He asks, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus said, “Peter, you don’t understand this know, but later you’ll figure it out.”

Peter brashly responds, “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus then quietly, but earnestly says, “If I do not wash your feet, you cannot be my disciple.” Mr. All-or-Nothing Peter then answers, “Well then don’t just wash my feet; give me a shower!”

So the master causes them to recline despite any protests. They do obey.

And He Will Come And Serve Them

To ‘*cause them to recline at table*’ naturally means he was going to serve food to them. However, there is no mention of food. You do not ‘recline at table’ unless there is a very tasty reason to do so. The verse seems to indicate that the serving of the food happens immediately following the ‘reclining at table.’ Look at the verse again.

Luke 12:37b

37 Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.

There seems to be no delay between their reclining and being served. The master dresses himself for service, he overcomes their protests and has them recline at table, and then he comes and serves them food. So where did the food come from?

It seems there are two possibilities. Either the slaves had already prepared a meal or the master brought food with him from the wedding feast. It is possible that the slaves had food in the house, but the difficulty is that they had no idea when the master would return. The next verse says his coming could be in the wee hours of the morning.

Luke 12:38

38 If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!

¹⁴ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

The Jews divided the night into three watches. The first was from 6:00 – 10:00 p.m., second watch was from 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., and the third watch was from 2:00 – 6:00 a.m. The master could come at any time in the late night or in the early morning hours. These are not typically times when food is prepared. So if the servants didn't make the food, then the master must have brought it with him. If we read a few verses more, we find support for this conclusion.

Luke 12:41-42

Peter said, Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all? 42 And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?"

Notice that the master gives a portion of food to those who are faithful to him. **The point of this illustration is not what the slaves have prepared for their master, but what the master has prepared for his slaves.** The master has brought food with him from the wedding feast to give to his slaves. And when he comes, he serves them! The slaves are not commended for what they have produced while the master was away. They are commended for eagerly waiting for him to return and being ready to receive him at the first knock.

So what does this parable show us?

- We have a master who has gone away from his house to attend a wedding celebration.
- We have slaves who love their master and are looking forward to his return and being with him once again.
- The slaves are commended for staying awake and being ready for his return, and not for having supper ready when he walks in the door.
- We have a master who breaks away from the wedding celebration before it's over because he is thinking about his slaves who are at home waiting for him and he gathers up some of the wonderful wedding food and takes it with him.
- When the master arrives home, he lightly knocks so as not to awake the household and his faithful slaves who are eagerly waiting for him, quickly rush to the door and let him in.
- The master then insists that his faithful slaves recline at table while he serves them the food that he enjoyed at the wedding celebration and tells them all about the wedding.

In this parable Jesus is the master and the slaves are his disciples. Jesus more than once portrays Himself in the role of a servant and we, like Peter, are often very uncomfortable when we encounter these occasions. And I think the reason we are so uncomfortable with this teaching is not out of a holy respect for our exalted Savior, but out of an unholy desire to justify ourselves before God.

We are uncomfortable with a Savior who serves us because in our sinful proud hearts we would rather not be indebted to him. We are more comfortable having Him indebted to us by way of our exceptional service to Him, which in our minds, He cannot do without. At the deepest root of our sinful hearts, each of us would rather earn our salvation rather than eagerly receive it by faith through grace. The words of Jesus,

Luke 22:27

“Who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

Jesus you make my head spin. Yes, Jesus, the greatest is the one who reclines at the table and Jesus you are the greatest, so sit down at the table and let me serve you! But Jesus says, *“But I am among you as the one who serves.”*

Whom does Jesus serve? And how does He serve them?

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus serves us by saving us. He gave His life as a ransom for many. We are completely unable to save ourselves. ***We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the work of Christ alone.*** Salvation is gift to be received, not a wage to be earned. When we put our faith and trust in what Jesus did (through His holy life, His atoning death, and His powerful resurrection) and we stop trusting in what we think we can do, THEN our souls are saved.

How Should We Serve Him?

But we object! Jesus calls us to serve Him! Yes, we are called to serve Him, but the question is **how** are we to serve him? In what manner are we to serve Him? With what *attitude* should serve Him?

He Does Not NEED Our Service

When we serve Him we are NOT to think that we supply some need in Him. God does not stand in need of our service. He is quite capable.

Acts 17:25

nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

God is the Great Giver. He is not the Great Receiver. We are indebted to Him, not He to us! When we obediently serve Him we ought not to think that we are meeting some need that He has. It is He who supplies the very breath we need in order to serve and obey Him. We need Him to serve Him. He does not need us to serve Him.

James 1:17

Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

God gives us spiritual gifts to edify and strengthen one another. God Himself is not strengthened as we exercise the gifts He has given to us. Everything we have we have received from Him. We have nothing that was not given to us by Him.

1 Cor 4:7

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Every gift we have has been given to us by Him. So if all we have comes from Him, then we do not serve Him in such a way as to provide Him with what He does not already possess.

Everything we have comes from Him; our bodies, arms, legs, our strength, intelligence, life, breath and everything comes from Him. So He does not “NEED” our service in such a way that we provide Him something He would not otherwise have.

We Should Serve Him With His Strength

We He calls us to some form of service, we should serve Him in the strength that He supplies in order that the glory will be to His name.

1 Peter 4:11

... let him who serves, serve by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

God invites us to serve Him NOT because He needs us, but because He wants to bless us by rewarding our obedience! The invitation to serve Him is for OUR good, not His! He is sufficient in Himself. He is God! He has no lack. Yet He has decided that He would allow us to experience His fullness and sufficiency through our dependence upon Him – even for the very strength to serve Him.

Phil 4:19

My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

What an amazing verse! What an amazing God! A God who supplies our needs and does not require us to supply His needs. **How great it is to be the slave of THAT God!!!**

Is 64:4

From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts [or works] for those who wait for him. 5 You meet him who joyfully works righteousness...

There is no God like this in all the earth! No one has ever heard of a God like this! No one has ever seen a God who ‘acts’ or ‘works’ for those who wait for Him. He works righteousness for those who wait for Him. He does not require them to work up their own righteousness. He requires them to trust His righteousness. Jesus is an amazing Serving-Savior! It is ultimate freedom to be His slave!!!

Blessed are the slaves who are eagerly waiting for their master to return. He will come and serve them! Jesus serves us by offering His life as a ransom for our sin. If we refuse His service, if we refuse His righteousness, we will not be saved.

Those of you who are already saved, don’t serve Him in your own strength. Serve Him in the strength that He provides so that He may receive all the glory.

The slaves in this parable were eagerly waiting for their master. When Jesus ascended into heaven before the eyes of His disciples, He promised He would come again. Therefore we are eagerly waiting for Him to return! We must be ready for Him to return. His return is certain. The exact time

of His return is uncertain. We do not know at what hour He will return. Some of us may meet Him in death before His return. We must be ready to meet Him at any time and we should be looking forward to that reunion. Are you waiting expectantly for Him?

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus commanded His disciples to remember His service. He commanded them to remember that He offered up His own body as a sacrifice for sin. They were celebrating Passover. Jesus became our Passover Lamb. He pictured His death in the Passover meal. He told His disciples that the bread represented His body and the wine represented His blood. He also told them to share this meal together. We are going to do that together now.