

# Eschatology and Stewardship

Text: LUKE 12:35-36

Scripture Reading: LUKE 12:13-21, 32-36

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**Four weeks ago we considered** the challenge found in GALATIANS 6:9; namely, that we should make the final harvest of souls at the end of the age the inspiration behind every good thing that we do. Taking up this challenge requires faith. It requires looking forward to something we cannot see or even scientifically prove will happen in the future. For this reason I decided to spend two Sundays discussing with you what it means to live a life of faith. Now, today, I would like to end up where I began. I would like to go back to the subject of the end of the world when our Lord will return to this earth for the second time in bodily form.

The Bible uses different figures of speech to talk about how people view life. For instance, there are places in the Bible where life is looked at like a race (i.e. HEBREWS 12). There are other places where life is viewed as a pilgrimage (i.e. HEBREWS 11 and 1 PETER 2). Last week we looked at words that used the figure of warfare as a way of looking at life (1 TIMOTHY 6).

When the Bible uses these figures of speech to describe what life is like, the most important thing is not the immediate thing that is happening; rather, it is the future thing that is going to happen. The race is not just a track along which men run, but it is the finish line that they desire to cross. The pilgrimage is not merely the pathway that winds through the valleys and over the mountains, but it is a city that the pilgrim longs to reach. And, the warfare is not just a clash of conflict, but it is the crowning joy of the ultimate victory. With each one of these figures, the ultimate is the inspiration of the immediate. Men and women run in order to win. People are serious about their pilgrimage, because they are determined to reach the city they desire. And, the passion for victory gives men the strength to fight.

All these figures of speech are nothing but different ways of saying the same thing. According to the Bible, the ultimate event that a person of faith should be looking forward to is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate thing that inspires everything the runner or the pilgrim or the soldier does. And, even if the runner or pilgrim or soldier should die before that great event occurs, he knows that he will still see his Lord face to face. Death is never the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is to see Jesus face to face. Whether it is at His Second Coming

before we actually die or whether we must die first matters little. Either way, to be physically with our Lord on the day when evil is totally defeated and justice reigns supreme is the ultimate event that inspires the man or woman of faith to press on.

Of course, not everyone looks at life the way I have just described it. However, every person does look at life from a particular point of view. And, even though many people cannot express it in words, below the surface of each person's thinking there is a concept of what life means to that person. To some people, life would seem to be a lot of study or a lot of work, the goal of which is amassing wealth or power. To others it would seem to be one constant opportunity for pleasure. In between the pleasure there are intervals of strenuous work needed to secure the pleasure. I have worked with people who absolutely hate the work they do. But, they love the pleasure that they pay for with the money they earn from the work they do. People I know who are like this are constantly looking forward to and talking about the next weekend or the next vacation.

**Whatever our concept of life may be**, it will have a great impact on our conduct and all of our relationships in this world. For this reason, I would like to spend a little more time explaining the concept of life that a Christian is meant to have. I would like to understand better this viewpoint of life that is always longing and waiting and expecting the return of the Master.

First of all, let me try to define for you a few unique things about this concept of life that we are supposed to have as Christians. *The first thing I want you to notice is how this concept of looking forward to the return of our Lord redefines the boundaries of life.* According to this view, life becomes a period of duration ending not with death but with the coming of the Lord Himself. This is so different from the average person who, every year, looks back and celebrates his physical birth and then looks ahead with wonderment and trembling to the day of his death. To the Christian man the boundaries are changed. The boundary of his life begins with his first meeting with Jesus. In the hour when the Lord comes to him, in the hour of the Lord's first advent to this man's personal experience—in that hour life begins. The other boundary is the moment when the Lord shall

come to him again, gathering that man to be with Himself. The life that looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ has redefined the boundaries of life.

*Another thing that happens when people take on this viewpoint of life is that fear is checked.* People naturally panic in the midst of catastrophe. People despair in the hour of apparent defeat. These are all natural human tendencies. But, for the person who really is looking forward to the day he will meet his Lord face to face things will be different. The catastrophes and the events that cause most people to fear for their lives will cause this forward-thinking person to feel a little excited about the possibility of seeing his Lord even sooner than he had anticipated.

Janiene and I recently saw the movie "God's and Generals," which was mainly about the life of Stonewall Jackson who was killed in action while fighting for the south during the American civil war. Prior to going off to war, he sat down with his wife and shared with her a passage from 2 CORINTHIANS 5. That passage talks about longing to leave this earthly tent to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. After Jackson was mortally wounded, and while he was on his deathbed, his wife was beside him. Both of them had total peace, because they knew the day that he was looking forward to had finally come, the day when he would meet his Lord face to face. For him, it happened on a Sunday.

I am greatly disturbed at the events taking place around the world today. The hate and the complete disregard for human life make me sick. But, recently when I spoke to a sister in the Lord about these events. I saw her eyes brighten as she spoke of the hope that the Lord may appear at any moment. The current events that were causing me distress brought to her mind the thought of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, and she had no fear. Fear is checked in the hearts of people who are looking for their Lord.

Related to this check of fear is also a lack of inner disturbance in the midst of change. Perhaps the best way to explain this is to use the analogy of a war. When a nation is at war, the ultimate goal of victory is the most important thing of all. Soldiers understand perfectly well that they must submit themselves to the plans and the purposes of generals who will do whatever is necessary to bring about victory. The soldier understands that he is being led by the plans of the generals, and at any given moment those plans might change. An order may be recalled and a new command issued. Such change is expected, given the great unpredictable nature of warfare. When the change happens, the soldier takes it in stride. The change does not cause disturbance within his soul.

In the same way, the man of faith entrusts his life to God. He is confident that his Commander will lead him to final victory, and that is the ultimate thing that matters. God has a plan for his life and is leading and guiding him and may at any moment change the direction. But, any change that will help hasten the day when the final victory over evil is realized is worth it.

*The life that is never disturbed  
is the life that is always prepared to be disturbed.*

*The life that is always disturbed  
is the life that is seeking never to be disturbed.*

In the forty days between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus trained His disciples to have the kind of outlook on life that causes a person to always be prepared to be disturbed. The disciples never knew when and where they would see Jesus next. Suddenly He would appear in their midst and catch them completely unprepared, disturbing the thing they were presently doing. Then, with equal suddenness He would disappear. Over and over again He did this.

Now, try to put yourself in their shoes. It is natural for human beings to feel that what they are doing in the present is very important. However, the most important thing was never the work they were doing at the time. Nor was it the meeting they were holding. Those things could be disturbed, because they were not the most important things. The most important thing was being in the presence of their Lord. Jesus would not wait until they were finished doing what they were doing. He would appear in the middle of everything. After a while they would grow accustomed to this and even expect it to happen. After a while they would be prepared at any moment for His return. They would wait and look for His sudden appearance. And, when Jesus finally ascended to heaven He told them that He would come again. He left them waiting and longing and looking. And, that waiting and longing and looking would forevermore influence the immediate thing they were doing.

Does this way of viewing life seem foreign to you? According to the Bible and according to Christ Himself, it is the true way of viewing life. Jesus came to me in the hour that I yielded to Him and He is coming to me again. I do not know when that will be. I only know that between the initial coming *when I became His* and that final coming *when I will be made like Him* in a way that I can only now imagine-during this in-between period of time-I am waiting and watching and longing.

**Now, let's take a moment to consider** how this unique outlook on life should affect the immediate things that we are doing. According to the words of

LUKE 12:35, the affect is anything but passive. A person who waits for the Second Coming by only looking up at the sky is not obeying the words of LUKE 12:35 which say, "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning." The person who is longing for the Second Coming of Christ is actively working with the expectation that his work might be interrupted at any moment by the return of His Lord.

This kind of attitude will not make him less diligent. In fact, it should make him infinitely more diligent. He does not want His Lord to return and find him not working. He knows that diligently and cheerfully working to do God's will is a characteristic of all those who will eventually see God face to face. And, he is aware that a lack of diligence and cheerfulness means nothing less than a lack of vision of the Second Coming.

Now, let me assure you that it is a lot easier for me to preach these truths than it is for me to practice them. Maintaining a vision of Christ's Second Coming is probably one of the most difficult things for North American Christians to do these days. In North America, Christians have a tendency to work so as to build permanent structures here upon this earth. Like the rest of the people living in this rich land, we tend to find security in money and things rather than using money and things to hasten the day of our Lord's return.

***The specific example I will use*** to illustrate my point has to do with money. Many other examples can be given, but Pastor Tim and I have been instructed by the Elder Board of our church to preach on the subject of stewardship at least once during the month of September and at least once again during the month of November.

A steward is a person who takes care of money and property that has been entrusted to him by his master. His primary goal is to use the money and property in a way that will fulfill the goals and accomplish the plans of his master.

As Christians, we must recognize that nothing we have belongs to us. It all belongs to God. It was His to begin with and it still belongs to Him even though He has entrusted it to us. The reason why He has given it to us is so that we can invest it. We are not to invest it in a way that guarantees security for ourselves. Rather, we are to invest it in a way that will work to hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. That is the ultimate event for which we live.

Again, I tell you that this is easier for me to preach than it is for me to practice. But, what good does it do for me to tell you to practice Biblical stewardship if I

don't practice it myself? It is a fairly well known fact that when a pastor fails to practice Biblical stewardship, the stewardship ministry of the whole church is impacted in a very negative way.

So, I will be honest with you to tell you that, since I left Taiwan and returned to the United States, I have personally been struggling to manage my money in a way that it relates to the Second coming of Jesus Christ.

While living in Taiwan, and even in the years before I went to Taiwan, this was easy for me to do. I had dedicated my life entirely to the purpose of building God's kingdom and Janiene had joined with me in that commitment. In the years before we moved to Taiwan, this meant that we did not purchase anything that we could not sell, throw away, or store in somebody's attic. The fact that our total salary and housing allowance combined was \$900 a month did not bother me at all.

When we arrived in Taiwan, we lived a month at a time. We were paid in cash. We never used checks or credit cards. Everything was done in cash. A ten-dollar New Taiwanese bill was worth about \$2.50 U.S. Every month I would take my paycheck and convert the whole thing into ten-dollar bills so as to make it stretch out to cover all of our needs. Not a single month went by where there wasn't enough money to pay the bills and purchase the food needed to eat. The mission to which we belonged took care of our rent and our tuition for language school and our health insurance and our Social Security and Medicare payments. The fact that we did not own a house or a car or have a retirement plan never seemed to matter that much. The fact that we never had a large amount of money in a savings account also did not seem to matter. It was easy to take the cash that was handed to me every month and parcel out ten percent to give to the church. At the end of the month, if we happened to have any money left over from paying our bills and buying our food, it was not difficult to donate that money to other needs. It was not hard to give more than ten percent to the Lord's work. For over twenty years, it was not difficult for me to make the connection between my personal stewardship and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Most of the time, I was conscious of the connection.

But then, in 1998, we returned to the United States. And, for the first time in my adult life I had choices to make that I never had to make before. There were financial planners and insurance agents in the church we attended who sat down with me and very seriously discussed with me the importance of building up certain securities for the future. People convinced me to purchase life insurance for my wife and myself.

People convinced me to invest in certain stocks that would make it financially possible for my children to go to college. People in the church made it financially possible for us to own two cars. And, my landlord, who was a member of the Chinese Christian community, even talked to me about working out a deal for me to purchase the beautiful home in which we were living.

Now, I know that many of you are thinking that purchasing life insurance and saving money and buying a car and buying a house are normal things that people do. But, for me, I was being challenged to do these things for the first time, and it was having a tremendous influence on the way I viewed life. I found it so much easier to forget about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and become more concerned with my future death and the security of my family after I die.

The boundaries of my life began to change back to what they were before I met my blessed Savior. After returning to the United States, I have come to understand first-hand why it is so hard for Christians living in America to live in a way that they are always waiting and longing and looking to meet their Master face to face.

Tithing, which used to come so natural and easy, is now no longer easy. And, giving beyond the tithe seems almost impossible. A certain institution (Ronsvalles of Empty Tomb, Inc.) estimates that if every Christian in America would give a tithe of their income, an additional 130 billion dollars a year would be received for kingdom work. And, if they gave beyond the tithe it would even be much more. I now understand first-hand why it is so hard for American Christians to tithe.

There is very little in our environment outside of the church and even within the church that encourages us to look at life the way we should. Instead of taking the money God has given to us (which belongs to Him) and investing it in His kingdom, we are encouraged to invest it in ourselves.

I am at a crossroad in my life. Since returning to the United States, the way I view life has changed, and not for the better. Now, I must decide to change back so that I am once again waiting and watching, and even longing, for my Master to return.

I have put forth a lot of effort over the past five years to build financial security for my family and myself. For the most part, I have failed in my efforts. So I am now asking myself, does it matter that I have failed? Does it matter whether or not I ever have a bumper of money in the bank that I can fall back on in case of

emergency? Does it matter whether or not I ever own a home? Does it matter whether or not I can ever afford to retire? Does it even matter whether or not my paycheck is enough to pay all the bills?

I hear many voices telling me, "Yes, these things do matter a great deal, and I must work to provide for my family and myself these securities even if it means moving for the eighteenth time." But, there is now another voice telling me, "No, these things do not really matter that much. What really matters is that you are working to build God's kingdom and hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Even if your paycheck is not enough to pay the bills, you must tithe and even be willing to give more than a tithe. If God wants to change your orders, if He wants to disturb what you are doing, so let it be, even if it must happen in the middle of a school year. The only unsafe and insecure place to be is outside of the will of God."

Is this second voice I hear the voice of the Holy Spirit? Oh, yes, I am certain it is. And yet, sometimes I wonder. The other voices seem to tell me that it is my Christian duty to provide for the security of my family. At times, that seems to make total sense.

And so, I struggle, and I know the struggle is not about to end in the near future. But, I thank God for allowing me to struggle, because I am convinced that my struggle is also your struggle. And, the Voice or voices I decide to listen to will have an impact on the stewardship ministry of this church. There is an intimate connection between the way church leaders go about managing their personal finances and the way the churches they lead manage their money.

***So, I conclude this message*** with a plea for you to pray for your church leadership. Pray that your leadership will long for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in a way that will strongly influence the way they manage their personal finances. That, I believe, is the most important thing to pray for. If that is not done right, the second thing will be very hard to do. The second thing I ask you to pray for is how the money collected in the offering bags should be invested. In the coming years, the leadership of this church is going to have to make some very tough decisions.

So, my plea today is not for more money. It's a plea for an attitude about money that is controlled by a passion. May God grant to us a passion to "be dressed ready for service, keeping our lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when He comes and knocks, we can immediately open the door for Him."