

11-5-23

Sermon- What does it Mean to "Keep Alert?"

Scripture- Matthew 25: 1-13, CTW Ps 78:1-7

Hymns- 646, 544, 469

Theme: Here we find that saying and doing are two different things. We sing songs and cite verses about being on mission for God, but do we live our lives in a state of readiness to "now therefore go?" Today Jesus gives us a painful example of what happens when we are not truly ready.

Introduction:

A priest and pastor were standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that read, "The End is near! Turn around before it's too late!"

One speeding motorist yelled out his window, "Leave us alone, you religious nuts!" as he flew by. From around the curve they heard screeching tires and a big splash.

"Do you think," said one clergyman to the other, "we should just put up a sign that says 'Bridge Out' instead?"

Today we'll talk about how the end of this world as we know it is nearer than it has ever been before. The word "Advent" means "coming."

Next month as we celebrate the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, we also remember that the risen Christ is coming for a second time.

In fact, for every verse in the Bible prophesying about Jesus' first coming, there are eight that prophesy about his second coming!

Long before Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesus was the original "I'll be back!" In Revelation 22:7 Jesus says, "I am coming soon!"

And we can say with the apostle John, "Amen, Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus!" (Luke 22:20).

In today's passage, from Romans 13:11-14, the Apostle Paul writes with a sense of urgency. We need to be ready for Christ's return at any moment. It could be today. It could be tomorrow.

Billy Graham once said, "We are to wait for the coming of Christ with patience. We are to watch with anticipation. We are to work with zeal. We are to prepare with urgency."

The famous commentator Warren Wiersbe sums up today's passage in three commands: "Wake up, Clean up, and Grow up!"

Let's consider those three commands:

I. Paul reminds us to Wake up! Paul begins with an alarm clock analogy. He says in verse 11, "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

A. I am absolutely convinced that we are living in the End Times. Do you know how I know? Because any time between Jesus' ascension to heaven and his return from heaven is called the End Times.

No one knows how long this period of time will last, but it's all part of the End Times. First century Christians initially believed that Jesus would return immediately. When he didn't, some grew complacent and began to lose a sense of commitment to their faith.

So, Paul reminded them that they were ever nearer to their ultimate salvation, their heavenly home.

In our second passage for today, Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus told a parable with a similar theme, the Parable of the Ten Virgins. In that story, ten virgins—who today we might call bridesmaids—

were waiting on the groom to arrive for the wedding, but they got drowsy after waiting all night.

Finally, word came that he was on the way, but half the bridesmaids hadn't brought any oil for their lamps. They tried to borrow from the half that had, but were told, "We don't have enough for both; go buy some more." By the time they did so and returned, the wedding party had begun and they were locked out.

B. The central point of the parable reflects the Boy Scout motto: "Be prepared!" You never know when the groom will return for his bride. Scripture repeatedly refers to Jesus as the groom and the church as his bride. Church, wake up from your slumber and get ready for his return!...

II. Next Paul says Clean up! We don't want to be found dirty when Christ returns. Paul describes the waiting period as "night."

I have always told our son Ben, when he wanted to stay out late, that "Nothing good ever happens in the city after midnight!...get out and get home!"

A. Paul uses night and day not just to illustrate periods of time, but also good and evil. In Romans 13:12 he says, "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." That last phrase, "armor of light," suggests there is some protection in seeking to live godly lives.

In verse 13 Paul gives three couplets, or six examples of behavior to avoid. He says, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy."

There's a temptation here for everyone. Even after one has sufficiently aged past the physical temptations of carousing and

debauchery, there remain those nasty internal temptations of dissension and jealousy.

B. So how do we clean up when we so easily return to old temptations? We can all identify with Paul's words in Romans chapter 7, "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Romans 7:18-19, 24).

Recurrent sin reminds us that we are "powerless to change," in the words of Alcoholics Anonymous.

So we can also say with Paul, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25)! Our only hope for change rests in our Savior.

And that leads us to part 3, which is to ...

III. Paul's Next Command is that we Grow Up! Paul says, if you really want to clean up, you need to get rid of the old clothes that don't fit anymore and put on new clothes appropriate to your new standing as a follower of Christ.

Instead of trying to force ourselves into new habits, Paul says we should clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ himself and stop thinking about how to gratify all our other desires (verse 14).

A. If you seek to follow Christ, to truly put him first in your life, your desires for other less helpful things will diminish. Here the goal is not to live the perfect, sin-free life, but simply to follow Jesus, to become more like him every day. "Stop trying harder. Start trusting more!"

A native American story speaks of two wolves: one representing your good and wholesome self, the part of you that seeks to treat others honorably, to encourage, to build up, to love.

The second wolf represents your destructive, evil self, the part of you that bites out with sarcasm and resentment and gossip, that tears down others and satisfies your own needs alone. A boy once asked his father, "Which wolf will get stronger and over power the other in the battle for my life?" And the father said, "Son, that's simple: the one that you feed."

B. As you follow Christ, you feed the good wolf within.

Charles Stanley observes, "We know we should avoid a certain place, but we go there anyway. We recognize a personal weakness for a particular activity, but we tempt ourselves anyway. How often do we fall into sin because we plan for it?"

To "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" carries the idea of making Jesus a part of everything you say and do. "Like a comfortable piece of clothing that you wear all day, Jesus wants to join your decision-making process. He wants to be Lord over your singleness or your marriage, over your career and free time, over what you hear and watch.

By the way you live, you reveal that either He is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all"

IV. Concluding Thoughts: An Example to Follow

A. The 3rd United States Infantry Regiment, known as the "Old Guard," is the oldest active-duty regiment in the Army, dating back to 1784. Its mission is "to conduct memorial affairs to honor fallen comrades and ceremonies and special events to represent the U.S. Army."

One of its members, a lone sentinel, marches 21 steps forward and 21 steps back across the Tomb of the Unknowns, symbolizing

the 21-gun salute given a dignitary. Every 30 minutes he is replaced with a new sentinel. Since 1930, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, regardless of weather, a guard has marched.

Each one spends five hours a day preparing for this sacred duty.

One former commander, and two-star general, Dan York, wrote about the Old Guard members' commitment in a devotional ("Old Guard," in "Reveration," 22 November 2016,

He noted, an Old Guard member must commit two years of life to guard the tomb. He will live in a barracks under the tomb. He will swear not to drink any alcohol on or off duty or to swear in public for the rest of his life.

He cannot disgrace the uniform or the tomb in any way. The first six months he cannot talk to anyone outside his unit nor watch TV. All his off-duty time is spent studying the 175 notable people laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery.

After two years, each guard receives a wreath pin to wear on his lapel signifying his service as guard of the tomb. Only 400 presently wear this pin. So long as members obey these rules they may keep and wear the wreath.

B. When I think of the Old Guard, I wonder what it might be like if we as men and women committed fully to put on Christ daily.

Imagine if we swore off bad habits and foul speech, daily studied scripture to prepare for duty, faithfully worshipped God, and honored his name with our heart and our life?

What if a cross was more than just a piece of pretty jewelry, but rather a sign of the highest honor, demanding faithfulness to the One who sent his son to bear that pain? Amen?

Let us pray: "Lord, help us to wake up, to clean up, to grow up. You know we cannot do this on our own. We have tried and failed. Just when we think we have this Christian life figured out, we fall again into temptation and sin. We need your help to do it. Help us to put you first, to seek you first each day and throughout the day, to allow your Holy Spirit to bring about the change in us in your way. Father, when we look around us and see the signs of the times, we are more than ever convinced of the need to be prepared. Help us to achieve that in the name of your Son Jesus, who died that we might have life and have it abundantly. Keep us ever vigilant as we pray the pray he taught us to pray..."