

WHAT TO DO WHILE WAITING

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the beginning of a new series on the parables of Jesus. The parables are very exciting and challenging portions of Scripture. They are like mystery novels; there is always something secret about them, something hidden; thus they are enticing, challenging. There are clues given in each of the parables to lead us to the meaning of it. This is God's way of stimulating us to investigate and discover a hidden truth which will be a real treasure to us, enriching our lives in fantastic ways when we act upon it. The study of the parables can be as exciting as reading a mystery novel -- even more so -- because you are always involved in the parable and there is a treasure to be found at the end.

When I was a boy in Montana we used to take tenderfeet out on what we called a snipe hunt. Snipes are birds, in case some of you did not know. The idea of a snipe hunt is to take some uninstructed individual, give him a gunny sack, and take him to the bottom of a gully on a pitch-black night. Then all his friends are supposed to go out on the hillside and scare the birds into the gully and, as they come in, he is to put them in the sack. If you have ever tried it, you found you were left holding the bag. Though snipe hunts are very exciting they always are disappointing, especially to the one that is left holding the bag.

But not so with an investigation of the treasures of the parables. There you will end up with a tremendously exciting discovery of new truth.

We will begin with a series of three parables from our Lord's teaching in connection with the great Olivet discourse, as recorded in Matthew 24 and 25. I have chosen these because they are such a natural follow-up to our studies in the book of Daniel. There we were looking at prophetic matters, especially matters concerning the last days and the times of the return of Jesus Christ to earth. These three parables concern the same subject, but from three different approaches. They are:

- The parable of the household,
- The parable of the ten maidens (or ten virgins), and
- The parable of the talents.

All three parables are an amplification of one word which our Lord gave to his disciples, after he had outlined the course of events. He said to them, "Watch!" That word is stressed throughout this whole passage. It is the one command Jesus gives to those that are waiting for his coming. Through all the intervening centuries, no matter how long he may delay, the word is, "Watch!" These three parables tell us what it means to watch; therefore, they are extremely important to us.

In Chapter 24, Verse 42, Jesus says,

"Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." {Matt 24:42 RSV}

Also in verse 44,

"Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." {Matt 24:44 RSV}

And again in Chapter 25, after he has completed the story of the ten maidens, he says in Verse 13, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It is clear then that he is amplifying the word, watch!

There have been, in the course of the centuries, two extremes of interpretation of what our Lord meant when he said, *Watch*:

1. There have been those who took it very seriously. They studied the signs of the coming of the Lord which are brought out in predictive passages in both the New Testament and the Old. They became so involved that they actually set dates for the return of Jesus Christ. Again and again men have said Jesus was coming on a certain day, on the basis of what they found in Scripture. Sometimes they have even sold their homes and property, put on white robes (I don't know why they always put on white robes; perhaps we associate white robes with the coming of the Lord. That makes you wonder what the Black Panthers are waiting for, doesn't it?) and have gone out on hilltops to wait for the Lord to return. He did not come, of course, and they were disappointed and had to explain by intricate interpretations of Scripture. But that is an extreme and wrong interpretation of what "watch" means. Our Lord did not mean that we are to be standing forever gazing up into the heavens, like an air raid sentry on duty. He means we are rather to involve ourselves in the activities brought out in these three parables. That is why he gave them to us.
2. Another extreme interpretation of "watch" is to come to the conclusion that we cannot know the time of the Lord's coming and therefore there is no use to worry about it. Forget it! Just go on living life as you like, until he comes. If he comes, then he comes. It is time enough to worry about it then. In the meantime, go on living as you please regardless of whether he is coming or not. That really is to live as though he were not coming at all. That is what many Christians have settled for.

But that is the reason our Lord gave us these parables. If we do not understand the parables, we will not watch the way he tells us to. And if we do not watch, we will be deceived. The key note of this passage in Matthew 24 and 25 is that the intervening age, between the time our Lord uttered these words, and the time he would come again, is to be an age of unprecedented deceit, a time when it is easy to be fooled, when many will be attracted by the glamour of the phony, the glitter of the false, and we drawn away by enticing, siren voices that will lead down wrong paths, and get many confused. That is exactly what is happening in this 20th century, and it is increasing as we draw near the close. So it is absolutely important that we understand what our Lord means when he tells us to watch.

Let us take the first parable, found in Chapter 24, Verses 45-51:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, 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 punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." {Matt 24:45-51 RSV}

It is obvious that this situation fits us. Here is a household whose master is away and the household is waiting for him to return. The master has appointed certain servants and given them responsibility during the time of his absence.

1. The only activity mentioned is that of feeding the household. These servants have the primary and important task of feeding the household at the proper time. That is the first essential, then, in watching. Watching means to feed and be fed by the Word of God, as we shall see in a moment. This is most obvious in the parable, is it not? The household must eat or they can do nothing else. That is basic, fundamental. If they do not eat, they will not survive, they will perish. They can do nothing else until they have established their health and strength by eating.
2. Now the household is obviously the church, the house of God. It is so described in Scripture.
3. The servants are those appointed to teach within the church. It does not only mean pastors, evangelists, or theologians. It includes also editors of magazines, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, children's Bible class teachers, even parents within the home who teach their children. It is any one who is in the position of teaching another within the body of Christ.

Notice how the Lord puts it? "Who then is the faithful and wise servant?" He invites us to put our own name there. Are you that kind of a servant? Are you a teacher? Well, then, are you this kind of a

teacher? That is what Jesus is asking.

4. The food is obviously the Word of God. What else could it be? The Word of God is intended to feed the people of God. Jesus said so himself, remember? When the devil came and tempted him to turn the stones into bread, he said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," {Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4 KJV}. The Word of God is truth. It is the unveiling of reality. It is the revelation of the way things really are. Thus if you are going to live you have got to know what life is all about, to know the way things really are. That is why the word of truth is also food. It is referred to as such in many places in Scripture:

In his first letter Peter exhorts us to "desire the sincere milk of the word, that we may grow thereby," {cf, 1 Pet 2:2 KJV}. There is a certain quality about the Word of God that is like milk to a baby: it feeds and establishes life.

In another place Paul mentions the strong meat of the word, {cf, Heb 5:12, 5:14}. There is something that the most intelligent mind can ponder and which will sustain the most advanced Christian. There is power in it, and strength to be derived from it. It is absolutely essential and fundamental to spiritual growth or understanding of life.

Many Christians are confused about the need to study the word. They think of it as kind of an option, something to do if you are especially religious. But that is not what it is for at all. It is for those who want to find out what life is all about. It is not just for the religious but is the revelation of the way things are -- in life, in death, in the universe, the physical universe as well as the world of ideas, thoughts, and the social life of man. It touches everything. You never can understand life unless you understand the Word of God. That fact is basic, essential, and fundamental to the whole Christian message. Therefore, we are not talking about something that ought to interest only the religious; it ought to interest anyone, anywhere. That is the character of the Word of God.

In this parable you will notice that the Lord takes note of two kinds of servants: There are the faithful, and the faithless.

- The faithful are those who feed, continually and plentifully, the ones entrusted to their care. When the master returns, Jesus says, "Blessed (or happy) is that servant when his master comes and finds him doing what he was told to do."

His approbation is put in these terms: "he will set him over all his possessions." From that you can gain an idea of how important this is. To feed someone else from the Word of God is to learn how to live yourself. If you learn how to understand life the way God has designed it and made it, then you can understand how the universe functions, and the marvelous procedure by which God relates to man, works through man, and lives in man. You become master of the secrets of life. Then when the Lord returns he will give you an opportunity to exercise that knowledge in realms of power beyond belief, beyond your highest imaginings right now. The Word of God is full of hints like this of what the future is like for those who learn how to live down here, now. It will be incredibly exciting. It will be beyond our wildest imaginations. We will be equipped with power and tools more exciting and more capable than any we can possibly imagine now. We will be given tasks of fantastic involvement, demand and challenge. All this is hidden in these words, "he will set him over all his possessions."

It includes everything, does it not? "You are Christ's and Christ is God's," says Paul, "therefore all things are yours," {cf, 1 Cor 3:23}. There are tremendous possibilities involved in that passage.

- Well then, what about the faithless servant? This is the one who fails to feed the household of God. The Lord tells us what happens. He cannot control the household and begins to beat them. The only way he can get them to do what he wants is to lash at them, beat them, hound them and strike them. He suffers in his own person a moral breakdown. He indulges his own appetites to extremes, eats and drinks with the drunken. When the master returns he finds the man failing in his primary task and he is condemned and sent to a place of frustration and eternal defiance against the will of God. There men weep out of a sense of lost opportunity, and gnash their teeth in defiance of God.

All of this underscores the importance of feeding on the word. That is the whole thrust of this parable, it is what our Lord wants to emphasize.

What does the Word of God accomplish that makes it so absolutely, fundamentally, necessary? I should like to list for you seven things from the Scriptures, which the Word of God does. They are gleaned from many places, so I shall not attempt to quote Scripture in support. But you will find that these seven things can never be obtained from any other source. Nothing else will accomplish the seven things which the Word of God alone can do in your life.

As we go through this list you will see how much power there is in this remarkable word. It is a most powerful instrument.

I had the experience this week of watching the manuscript of my first book printed by a computer at Stanford. It was done by a new process in which the manuscript was typed directly into the computer, then changes can be made, and the computer will print it back as changed. It can print the entire book of some 200 pages in less than ten minutes! As I was watching it do this, I wondered what effect the Word of God would have on that computer. I seriously doubt if you could get it to print anything pornographic from now on!

The **first** of the seven accomplishments is, the Word of God reveals Jesus Christ and thus strengthens and refreshes the human spirit. That is its primary purpose. If it does nothing else than that, it has achieved its major task. It is not to give us information, primarily; it is to help us to see a Person, the Lord Jesus. As the opening words of Hebrews puts it,

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son," {Heb 1:1-2a RSV}

What the Son says to us is the ultimate revelation of life. To see the Son, through the medium of the word, is to find your own heart attracted and drawn to this marvelous personality, this magnificent One, this spotless, unsullied Son of God, in all the magnificence of his strength and greatness. That is the Bible's primary purpose. When you read it, read it for that. Read it to find Christ, because he is on every page of the Old and the New Testament. The Bible is all about Jesus Christ.

The **second** thing is, the Word makes possible increasing self-understanding, and therefore knowledge of and guidance for yourself. James says the word is a mirror: When you stand in front of it, you will see yourself. There is no other book in the world which will do this. There are helpful insights in psychology and psychiatry, but the help you get from these ultimately derives from the Bible. Yet the Bible goes much further than any of these; it truly helps you understand yourself. An eminent French professor, Dr. Emile Caillet, who was an agnostic tells how he became a Christian through a remarkable experience of being given a Bible in a most unusual way. He calls the Bible, "The Book That Understands Me," because that is what struck him most forcibly about it. It understood him and helped him to understand himself.

The **third** item is, the Word will lead to the exercise of true power and impact. It will make your life count. It turns life into something worth the living, something worthwhile. If you learn the truth about yourself, and you learn the truth about Jesus, and discover that God has put the two together -- he in you -- you have discovered the secret of power! You have found in that secret the way by which your life may be made to count, and become exciting and meaningful. Paul puts in one brief phrase the whole story "Christ in you" {Col 1:27}, the only hope you will ever have of obtaining the exciting glory that God intends for human beings.

The **fourth** factor is that the Bible explains the cause and cure of family, social, and world problems. You can not understand what is going on in your family life, your social life, and in all the problems that are before us in international affairs, unless you understand the viewpoint of the Bible. I make that statement unequivocally. I do not know anyone who understands what is going on who ignores the Bible. Most admit themselves they do not understand. Statesmen confess today that they do not know what is happening in the world, nor why it is happening. Students of social problems, psychologists, philosophers, etc., admit they do not know what is happening. Economists state flatly that they do not understand what is happening to our economy, nor how to solve its problems. More and more there comes, from all directions, a confession of utter bankruptcy in

understanding what is happening in life. One great thing about the Bible is that it gives us a world view which fits all the symptoms. It explains them logically, reasonably, and offers the only possible remedy for them. It gives not only the cause but the cure, as far as any individual is able to work it out, so that no one need any longer be a part of the problem but may become a part of the solution.

The **fifth** item is, the Bible gives specific answers to many questions on life and death. Are there other beings in the universe? The Bible answers that. What happens after death? Who hasn't asked that question? The Bible can answer it. What is wrong with premarital sex? The Bible answers that. What happens to a society that lets down the barriers and goes all the way in sexual matters? The Bible can tell you, and it is unquestionably true, because you can see it demonstrated all around. How did evil originate? Where did it come from? Oh, the many questions that are answered in the Word.

Six, it reveals the future and the past. It goes back to the origin of the universe and of man himself, and then looks on to the end of history and tells us what the final pattern or events will be. No other book can do that; there is no other source of knowledge like that.

Finally, **seventh**, it protects from unknown dangers. We have no idea what a knowledge of the Bible is doing for us in protecting us from demonic assault, from the occult, the weird, from hidden temptations and the dangers of the unknown. Increasingly we are made aware that men do not know very much about such things despite all our vaunted knowledge. >From those vast areas of mystery and darkness there come all sorts of dangers from which the knowledge of the Word, even though we may not understand the nature of the dangers themselves, nevertheless will deliver us.

A Christian who learns to feed on the Word becomes stable, alive, vital, an exciting person. Whenever a church takes the Word of God seriously you will always find it to be alive, extremely vital, changing society around.

In all honesty, we must admit that this is rare. The church in many places has grown incredibly weak. Many are made up of people who are constantly at one another's throats, quarreling, self-indulgent, immoral.

Why?

Well, see how the Lord puts his finger right on it! It is because they are not properly fed, that is why. They are not satisfied by the Word of God. And why do they have no food? Because those responsible have lost the hope of the coming of the Lord! That is what Jesus says. "But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'my master is delayed,' then he will beat his fellow servants," and lose his own moral standards. That is what has happened in the church. You can trace the pattern clearly.

I know a man who was once a very close and dear friend. We understood one another, shared Christian fellowship often together. But one of the points of disagreement we had was on the matter of the coming of the Lord. He rejected ultimately the truth that Jesus Christ was coming back again. Though he was a trained minister, he began to drift from his moorings, and soon it was quite apparent that he was losing his grasp on life. Now he is completely out of the ministry, having totally renounced his Christianity. This pattern of failure takes place again and again today. The Lord knows what he is talking about.

When we lose the hope of his coming there is no longer incentive to feed the people. And when they have no food, seven things happen to them that are the exact opposite of the seven things I have just set before you. Let me run quickly through them:

- First, there is no inner strength or nourishment for the human spirit. There is no vital contact with God. There is no personal, individual knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and therefore, there is no inner strength in life.
- Second, there is ignorance of self. They do not understand themselves, they cannot. This creates a tremendous demand for self-knowledge and is what lies behind the increasing cry in our day for psychiatry and other sciences which try to work in these areas and quite honestly try to help, but can only go so far. They can help only to a degree. Men are turning to these empty cisterns of human help

to find the self-knowledge they are lacking because they do not know the Word.

- Third, there is no power in life, and there cannot be. Instead there come division, quarreling, and fighting one with another because there is no power to regulate life.
- Fourth, world conditions baffle and depress them. You only have to read widely today to see how true this is, how many so-called Christians in churches are absolutely baffled by the conditions taking place in the world. They do not understand them at all.
- Fifth, there is no answer to the questions they ask. Death is a frightening thing. They do not know where to turn when they face it.
- Sixth, there are widespread delusions adopted about the past and the future. They seize upon any reasonable sounding explanation of where men came from, regardless of whether it squares with facts or not. They leap upon hopeful optimistic dreams of the future that are not based upon the stark reality of human evil, and they believe these delusions.
- Seventh, they are exposed without defense to dark powers that move in to take over and possess the human spirit. More and more widely in our day we are finding this taking place.

Now what is our Lord saying to us?

Well, he is saying that if you are going to watch for his coming, the first essential is that you must know the Word of God. You must read and learn and study and seek to know him, first of all.

How well do you know the Word of God?

I want to put that question to you as members in attendance here at Peninsula Bible Church.

We have a reputation for knowing and teaching the Bible, but I am afraid there is still much biblical illiteracy among us. There are people who do not know anything about the Bible at all. I want to ask you to measure yourself by three tests which are given in Hebrews 5, by which you can check yourself as to how much you know of Scripture. I am not going to ask you how far it is from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and I do not care how many kings there were in Israel, or how many in Judah. Those are not the important questions. But here are the three things that will test you.

- First, can you tell the difference between right and wrong, especially when right looks wrong, and wrong looks right? Have you learned how to use Scripture so as to tell the difference?
- Second, can you translate Scripture into right conduct? Have you learned how to apply what you read to your own life, so that it changes you and you end up doing the right instead of the wrong? Or do you constantly find yourself thinking you are doing the right thing and end up by looking back and finding that you have made a mistake again. That shows you do not know the Word of God.
- The third test is: Can you teach others? Are you able to help someone else? Or have you been a Christian all these years and you still do not know how to teach anyone else, but you need yourself to be taught the first principles of the Word of God.

These are the ultimate tests.

They are very important because if you are not on the way to these goals then you do not have much of chance to stand in these days of deceit. We are moving into a time in history when we shall be flooded with more pressure to accept false ideas than we have ever had before. We are already feeling the pressure. Widespread delusions are abounding in our day based on philosophies that are basically, fundamentally wrong. Yet students and adults are accepting them with the utmost gullibility. I find this is true all over. You will never be able to stand against this flood of deceit unless you know something about the Word of God.

That is what Jesus is saying. If you do not know it, you will be sucked in, you will not be able to stand.

When he returns, he will decide what to do with you.

We are now going to celebrate the Lord's table. This is fundamentally a commitment service, a time when we recommit ourselves again to the principles for which Jesus Christ stands. I would urge that each of us make it

the kind of a commitment service in which we say to ourselves, "I'm going to learn the Scriptures, I'm going to study, and know the Bible." That will take resolve on your part, and it will take continuing exposure to the Word, both publicly and in private. You cannot learn it all in a public meeting. Let us now make this the point of our commitment.

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