

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 12:32-40

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This series of sayings about an appropriate spirituality, attitude, and way of living in relation to the kingdom of God occurs in the midst of a long speech (Luke 12:1-59). Jesus is talking to us as disciples in the midst of a huge crowd. There is a sense of his addressing us as an in-group. The theme that runs through these loosely related sayings is the theme of readiness/being alert/making decisions in relation to the coming of the kingdom of God.

The first two episodes of this series, which begin "Do not be afraid" and "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out," address the theme of greed. This theme was present in the earlier part of the series of sayings: "It is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, give alms, make purses for yourselves that do not wear out."

The second part, that is, the last three episodes of these sayings, address the issue of watchfulness and being alert, not being sleepy, lazy, not paying attention to what's happening in relation to the kingdom of God. The metaphors present in this section are in effect little parables. The first is: "Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet." It is addressed to servants. The second is about the owner of the house: "If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he wouldn't have let his house be broken into. These are all parables that end with the injunction: "You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

### Mnemonic Structure

1. The mnemonic structure for the first episode of these sayings is, "Do not be afraid," then, "Sell and give."
2. The second episode begins with purses: "Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out, a treasure in heaven where thieves do not come near and no moth destroys. Where your treasure is there your heart will be also." The verbal thread that runs through this episode is *treasure*, an unfailing "treasure in heaven" and "where your treasure is."
3. The next episode begins with the command, "Be dressed for action with your lamps lit." This command identifies the theme: be ready for action. What follows are examples of being ready: "Like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet" and "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds alert."
4. The next episode also ends with "Blessed are those servants."
5. The last episode is "know this": "That if this owner of the house had known." Notice the verbal connection, "know this": "If he had known at what hour the thief

was coming he wouldn't have let his house be broken into, so you must be ready." The beginning of this saying, "Be dressed for action," and its ending, "You must be ready for the Son of Man is coming," is an *inclusio* that surrounds these sayings about being ready.

There's a translation issue in relation to the NRSV. I have used the translation of the NRSV, which translates the Greek word as "slaves": "Blessed are those **slaves** when the master comes," and so on. "Slaves" is not an inaccurate translation. It's probably the most accurate translation in the context of the ancient world. But in the context of American history, "slaves" has terrible connotations. The word raises a whole set of issues that are inevitably in the background of this translation. It implies that Jesus is endorsing slavery. While Jesus related to people who were slaves, and slaves were included in the early Church, he would not have endorsed chattel slavery as happened in the United States. It is not appropriate in our context to use that term and so I suggest that you translate this as "servants" throughout this section of Luke.

What's going on in these sayings is, again, thinking back from the future coming of the kingdom. It is related to the primary prayer that Jesus teaches: "Abba, your kingdom come." This is based on the anticipation that God's government in the world is coming. The structure of Luke's story is that God's government in the world was established with Jesus' resurrection so that we live now in the context of a world where God's government has been established but is not yet fully in power. Thus, we are to hear this as encouragement to look for the signs of the kingdom, for the signs of God's government in the world now. And when we see these signs to be ready to respond and to act in cooperation with those signs of God's government in the world. That's what this speech is about.

One of the issues of the kingdom or rule of God is money. What are we to do with money in relation to God's government in the world? Jesus' recommendation is clear: don't be afraid to give. First of all, it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Therefore, give in response to God's gift: sell your possessions and give alms, give to those who are poor. Jesus is effectively making economic calculations. Build up for yourselves treasures, that is capital in the bank of the government of God. Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out. Building up treasure is by giving, by not possessing lots of stuff, but rather of being ready to give, and thereby to build up a bank account in God's big bank.

The second part of this saying addresses the question of readiness for the coming of the Kingdom. The reality is that most of us, most of the time, are not really ready. We're living as if the structures of the world as we see it, as it is perceived and experienced, is the way things are. So for example, in relation to warfare, violence, and greed, the temptation is to be discouraged by those things and to be overwhelmed by them, to be lulled into the kind of passivity that comes from deciding that all these things are outside our control and there's nothing we can do about them.

The reality that Jesus announces is that the government of God is present all the time. It is always active. The issue is to be ready to respond to the initiatives that are being generated by God's Spirit and being ready to act. *Now*.

The metaphor that is used in Jesus' teaching here is *to be awake like waiting servants*. It appears that Jesus is describing what would have been a frequent scenario in the big houses of Galilee. Somebody who owned a big house would have servants. There's a big party, a wedding feast, and the master of the house goes away to attend it. The doors of these houses were locked because they were constantly subject to thieves. There was a widespread problem of burglary in ancient Galilee, with thieves breaking into homes. So the servants were the people in charge of the doors. The doorkeepers would not even open the door unless they heard the voice of the master. If they went to sleep and he came home at two o'clock in the morning and is knocking on the door, he's stuck outside until they wake up and open the door. Apparently the masters didn't have keys and were dependent on somebody opening the door.

That's the metaphor in the background of the story. It meant that the servants had to stay up, sometimes all night, because wedding feasts would go on until the early morning. They would have to stay up and stay awake. The problem was they would go to sleep! Jesus is using that metaphor to describe how we should be in relation to the kingdom of God; that is, to be alert all the time like a servant who stays up waiting until the master comes home. It's not unlike what parents sometimes do when their kids go out on dates. They will try to go to sleep, but often they'll sit up and wait until the children are home and they will let them in the door. So this is not unlike experiences that happen today.

The parable is about the kingdom of God rather than about what happened in the big homes of Galilee. Jesus says that when the master finds the servants alert when he comes home at two, three, four o'clock in the morning, he'll fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat and he will come and serve them. I'm willing to bet that never happened in the homes of the Galilean aristocracy, that they came home at three or four in the morning and in appreciation for their servants being ready they had them sit down, fixed a meal, and served it to them.

Rather, this is a metaphor for the kingdom. This is what God does. God will respond by celebrating and serving those who are God's servants and who stay awake waiting. This is a promise about what will happen for those who are faithful and who stay awake. They will be rewarded by God, by God serving them. There's a way in which that's what we celebrate in the Eucharist: God lays out a feast for us just as Jesus did at the Last Supper. He has us sit down to eat and drink and comes and serves us.

The last metaphor is about the owner of the house. "If the master of the house knew at what hour the thief was coming, then he would not let his house be broken into." Of course he didn't know, so he went to bed and went to sleep, and the thief broke in during the middle of the night. The metaphor is: You must be ready because you don't know the

hour when the Son of Man is coming. The Son of Man is like a thief who comes in the night at an unexpected time.

Jesus uses these metaphors as a way of getting people's attention and identifying a spirit or attitude. The energy that is present is not contemplative, but it's rather dramatic and has the spirit of these events. So in telling this, you want to capture that energy, that energy of staying awake and of the servants opening the door and being ready for the master. Jesus' spirit in this is a spirit of delight. That's the spirit of readiness for the kingdom.