

Listen to Jesus' Loving Imperatives

It's a classic Aesop's fable, "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." It's the story of a shepherd boy who repeatedly tricks the nearby villagers into thinking a wolf is coming to attack their town. When a wolf actually does appear and the boy again calls for help, the villagers don't believe him and all the sheep are eaten by the wolf.

Do you know why I share this story with you? It's because when it comes to Jesus' imminent return on the Last Day, I wonder if the pastor is seen as the shepherd boy repeatedly crying, "Jesus is coming soon, Jesus is coming soon," and the congregation is the villagers, who after so many times doesn't believe him anymore.

If this is even slightly the case for you, then in sincere love I pray that today's message is a wakeup call for you. Because the reality is this: Any faithful pastor is not tricking you like the shepherd boy tricked the villagers. When he proclaims that Jesus is coming soon, he is not crying wolf. He is proclaiming the truth of what Jesus himself said in his holy Gospels. To disbelieve the pastor's message of Jesus' imminent return is to disbelieve Jesus, and to disbelieve Jesus is to disbelieve God in the flesh, and to disbelieve God in the flesh is to disbelieve the Holy One who always tells the truth and always follows through on what he says he's going to do. That's how serious the message of Jesus' return is. Again, I say what I say in truth and in love, because I don't want any of you caught off guard when Jesus really does come. Neither does Jesus.

We read from Mark 13:32-37:

³² No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ Since he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"

Did you note how many imperatives Jesus used to grab your attention on the seriousness of his return? He used four imperatives: **Be on guard! Be alert! Keep watch! And, watch!** I've never known Jesus to waste his breath, so if he uses the imperative four times in six verses, it's got to be serious.

And it is. The Greek words for each imperative illustrate such:

- **"Be on guard"** literally means that if you see the signs of Jesus' return (like wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, hate, violence, persecution, and apostasy), be warned that you ain't seen nothing yet. In other words, the physical signs that you are seeing and Jesus

said you would see are going to be followed by some serious spiritual results. That's all in the imperative "be on guard."

- **"Be alert"** literally means to take no time off. In other words, you need to always be aware of what could happen, always aware of what will eventually come. Emphasis, "always."
- **"Keep watch"** or **"watch,"** which are the same Greek word, literally means to be vigilant. In other words, that you take personal responsibility to be attentive to Jesus' return.

Do you see how loving God is to give you these imperatives? Not only is he prepping you in advance of Jesus' return, he knows you so well. As often as you have heard the signs of the end, he knows how prone you can be to think that nothing is really following those signs. He knows how easily you can forget his warnings and how often you let down your guard. He knows how complacent and apathetic you can be. He knows how irresponsible you can be. So maybe, just maybe, if you can see how well he knows you, you will be more inclined to listen to his imperatives.

But in case the imperatives aren't enough love to wake you up, Jesus illustrates how critical it is to be ready. He says, **"It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back"** (Mark 13:34-35).

First, those assigned tasks that Jesus refers to are all the opportunities you have to serve God by serving others. That includes being a faithful spouse, a faithful parent, a faithful employer or employee, a faithful friend, and a faithful citizen. It includes being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It includes whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, you do it all to the glory of God.

But notice the one task that Jesus specifically mentions: The doorkeeper. What is a doorkeeper's one job? To keep watch. Why? Because at any time – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn (which were the four watches of the night), the master could return. Return when? Ah, there's the key. No one knows. Why? So that you will always be on your guard, always be alert, always keep watch.

God purposely does not tell you when Jesus will return because, again, he knows you too well. He knows that if he told you when Jesus is coming, you'd do what you want until the day before, and then you'd repent and get ready (kind of like Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday). He knows that you'd live every day for yourself, until you think it really matters, and then to save your own hide, you'd live for God the day before Jesus returns. If you don't think that's true, look at your sinful life now. Oh what a loving God you have that he doesn't tell you when he is returning so that you are prepared every day.

But how does one do that, be prepared every day? You do it by continuing to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and by faithfully carrying out the assigned tasks God has given you to serve him by serving others.

I know that doing those two things every day isn't easy. I struggle as much as you do. But do you know what will make it easier? It's if you always remember the One who is returning to take you to be with him in heaven. It's *Jesus* that's coming back! The exact same Jesus who lived for you, died on the cross for you, and rose for you to wash you clean of every spot and stain of sin. It's the same Jesus who rose from the dead and showed his disciples his hands, feet, and side. It's the same Jesus who said that in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, he has overcome the world. Remember what the angels specifically said to the disciples after Jesus had ascended into heaven: **"This SAME JESUS, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven"** (Acts 1:11). Knowing it's *that* Jesus, doesn't that change the way you wait for him? Doesn't it elevate your attentiveness? Doesn't it increase your anticipation? Doesn't it put an imperative on your readiness and watchfulness?

If you think of all of those who waited and waited for Jesus' first coming and remained faithful and alert throughout (Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the like), then take to heart the inspired words of Hebrews 12:1-3: **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary."** So that you will not grow weary until Jesus returns. So that you will not grow weary of Jesus' loving imperatives. Be on guard. Be alert. Keep watch. Amen.