

Girded and Ready – Surprise!

(Series: Parables of Jesus: Posing the Scandal of His Gospel)

I remember the first time I actually heard the startling thing Jesus says in the middle of this parable. My immediate reaction was, “There must be a typo here.” I read the text again, again thinking, “No, really, the publisher of this version of the Bible has accidentally made a typographical error here.” He, the Master, “will gird himself ... and wait on the slaves”? This has to be a printing mistake. So I took out other translations of the text, expecting at least one of them to correct the error. But no, they all record Jesus saying the same startling words.

Luke 12:37. “Truly I say to you...” Literally, “Amen I say to you...,” Jesus’ way of introducing a solemn declaration. “Truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve ...” He, the Master. “He will gird himself, and have them recline at the table ...” The slaves ... the Master will have the slaves recline at table. “And he will come up and wait on them.” He, the Master ... will come up and wait on them ... the slaves.

Let us take a moment and review the context in which Jesus speaks this Parable.

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. He has set His face toward Jerusalem, as Luke puts it (9:51). He knows what awaits Him in Jerusalem. Jesus says, “the Son of Man” – Jesus’ favourite self-designation – “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (9:22). He has said it again and again. “Let these words sink into your ears: for the Son of Man is going to be delivered over into the hands of men” (9:44). But, says Luke, the disciples did not understand. I would not have either.

Jesus is on His way to His destiny; to fulfill the reason He was conceived in the womb of the virgin. Luke chronicles this journey to His destiny in the central section of his gospel. From Luke 9:51 to Luke 19:28 we have the so-called “Travel Narrative.” Where Luke records the deeds and teaching of Jesus as He makes His way to Jerusalem. Most of the parables we have been studying were spoken during this journey.

In the twelfth chapter of his gospel, where we read Jesus’ startling words, Luke records some of what we could call “warnings.” In the twelfth chapter of Luke Jesus warns His disciples, and us, about some of the key issues disciples face as they follow Him.

So, for example, at the beginning of the chapter, Luke 12:1, Jesus warns them and us of what He calls “the leaven of the Pharisees.” Which, says Jesus, is hypocrisy. Living one way in public, another way in private. Pretending in public to be more than we really are.

Jesus then warns them, and us, about our fears. Fear is a strong force in our lives, a strong driving force. Jesus warns us to fear the right things and persons. Luke 12:4, "My friends," He says, "do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear; fear the One Who after He has killed the body has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him." An unsettling way to say that we are to live aware of and accountable to the One Who alone holds our destiny in His hands. A leader of a tribe in Papua New Guinea, who had come to faith in Jesus said: "We fear God ... and the fear of God kills our fear of everything else."

In Luke chapter 12, Jesus warns us that we may have to give witness to Him in some very tense situations. But He encourages us not to worry ahead of time about what we will say, for, Luke 12:12, "...the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

It is in Luke chapter 12 that Jesus tells His "Parable of the Rich Fool," warning us of the seductive power of possessions, causing us to put our hope for the future in what does not ultimately matter. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). Our hearts follow our treasures. We think it is the other way around: our treasures follow our hearts. No, our hearts automatically follow our treasures.

Then Jesus warns His disciples, and us, of one of the biggest obstacles to discipleship. Anxiety. Luke 12:22. "I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on." And He goes on to speak of the ravens and the lilies, who live in freedom from anxiety because they somehow know the love and care of Jesus' Father. Do not fret about eating and drinking and clothing. Instead, He says, use all that emotional energy to seek the kingdom of God (Luke 12:31). Adding the promise that if we seek as first priority the kingdom of God, all the other things we fret about will be taken care of. Adding the great promise of Luke 12:32 – "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom."

And then the text we read today. Luke 12:35-40. Jesus calls us to be ready. To be ready for His coming again. He will go to Jerusalem, be rejected by those, who of all people should have received Him, be crucified, on the third day resurrected, forty days later ascend to the Throne of the Universe, and one day come again. Be ready. "Be ready, for," He says, "the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect" (12:40).

As you know, this is not the only time Jesus calls the disciples and us to be ready. Jesus spoke many other parables about living in a state of readiness. I am thinking especially of those He spoke that day on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city of Jerusalem, in view of that huge Temple and Temple Mount Herod the Great built. Jesus speaks of His coming again, and teaches four parables on readiness. Matthew 24-25: The Parable of the Faithful Servant, The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, The Parable of the Talents, and The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

Luke 12:35. "Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight." Two metaphors on readiness.

"Keep your lamps alight," a theme that runs through the whole of Luke's Gospel. In the midst of the darkness, keep the lamps burning. This can only happen if we stay close to Him Who is the Light. We live in a state of readiness by walking in the Light of Him Who is the Light. We live ready for the coming of Him Who is the Light by living in His light right now. Letting Him expose any darkness in us and around us. Letting Him then drive any darkness away. "Keep your lamps burning." Not an easy thing to do a first century home. It takes much effort and attentiveness to detail to keep lamps alight.

And “be dressed in readiness.” Literally it is “let your loins be girded.”

People of the first century, both men and women, wore long robes that flowed to just above the feet. Much of the time they could move around without any problem. But if they wanted to engage in any strenuous physical activity they would pull the robe up and hold it up by wrapping a belt or rope around their waste. They “girded their loins.” The language taken from the story of the Exodus, when in preparation to be set free from slavery in Egypt, the people were told to get ready by “girding the loins” (Exodus 12:11).

Household servants, domestic helpers of the first century understood this metaphor very well. For they had to live most of the day with “loins girded.” They were always on duty. They lifted up their robes, and held them close to their bodies with a belt or rope, ready to carry out any order the Master gave.

And it is to that state of being, that daily posture, that Jesus the Son of Man is calling us. Be ready by being dressed for service. Be ready to wait on the Master when He comes. We have no idea of the day or hour. So we have to live everyday with our lamps burning and our loins girded.

A household servant lives his or her whole life oriented toward the Master. A household servant has one priority – please the Master. Be available to the Master for the Master’s will. Be at the disposal of the Master for the Master’s purposes.

Jesus calls us to be ready for His coming again by living as household servants, ready, as He says in the parable, “to wait on the Master” when he returns from the wedding feast.

Life in the first century revolved around the master-servant dynamics. In Jesus’ parable, He is working with these dynamics. The master is clearly a very wealthy man. In a wealthy household there was the master, of course, and the mistress, their children, the designated steward, the foremen, permanent hired staff, day laborers, and slaves. There was a clear order of ranking. The order in which I just named them:

- Master
- Mistress
- Children
- Steward
- Foremen
- Permanent paid staff
- Day laborers
- And servants, slaves.

(I owe this to Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 372). Think Downton Abby. Think the Palace of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. Think Fortune 500 corporations.

Servants were on the bottom of the ladder. Household slaves were the lowest of the low.

Be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. Keep your lights burning. And live as a household slave, at the beckon and call of the master, whose slightest wish is our command.

How does all this make you feel right now? How are you feeling about being called to live in such a state of being with such a posture, with such an identity? Adopt the position of the lowest of the low. Live as a household slave. How are you feeling about this?

Beneath my dignity. Right? Let's not take this too seriously. Right? I am a beloved child, a beloved child of the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Household slave? I mean, I understand that I am to serve, and all that. But adopt the position of the lowest of the low?

So we come back to the startling thing Jesus says in the middle of His parable.

We are to be ready, girded, ready to wait on the master. Girded and ready. "Blessed ..." says Jesus. "Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes." Girded and ready.

And then... Surprise! Luke 12:37. A little verse with huge theological implications. A little verse with huge sociological implications. A little verse with huge relational implications. A little verse with huge identity implications.

"Truly I say to you, that he will gird himself, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them."

What? This has to be a typo? Right? Who ever heard of such a thing? Somebody recorded the story wrong. Right? No. Luke got the story right.

"Truly," says Jesus. "Amen." "Amen I say to you." Whenever Jesus says "Amen," He is making a surprising announcement ... and we had better listen or we will miss out. "Amen, I say to you, He will gird himself." The master. Jesus the Son of Man. "He will gird himself." He will take up the posture of the lowest of the low. "He will have them recline at table." At the table where the master usually reclines. The servants will be invited to sit at the table where the master and his equals sit. "He will come up and wait on them." He, the master, the one on the top of the ladder, will wait on the slaves, the ones on the bottom of the ladder. The Son of Man, Who alone deserves to be at the top of the ladder, comes, and takes His place at the bottom of the ladder. He Who should be on the top serves those on the bottom. More to the point, He becomes one of those on the bottom. He becomes the slave of the slaves.

Surprise! Huge surprise. An Arab scholar commenting on this line in Jesus' parable reminds us that it is the Middle Eastern custom for a master of a house to serve his guests. Like Abraham did, when the three strangers visited him (Genesis 18:7-8). Even then, he served the guests with the help of servants. But says the Arab scholar, it is never the custom – anywhere! – that the master serves his slaves! [Ibn al-Tayyib, quoted by Bailey, 373].

Gird up your loins! Be ready! Be ready to wait on the Son of Man when He comes. Surprise! When the Son of Man comes, He will wait on you! He will gird Himself ... and wait on you!

Now how do you feel?

Listen to the parable even more carefully. And here I am following the lead of Kenneth Bailey (ibid, 370).

Look at Luke 12:36. “Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast.” Note the words “waiting” and “returns.” The servants are “waiting.” The master “returns.” The word “waiting” is better translated “expecting.” The servants are expecting the master to come. “Waiting” can be done in a passive mode. “Expecting” can only be done in an active mode. The word “returns” is better translated “withdraws.” The master does not simply return from the wedding feast. He intentionally leaves the feast before the feast is over. He “withdraws.”

So the Syriac and Arabic versions of the text have for centuries translated Luke 12:36 – “and be like people who are *expecting* their master when he *withdraws* from the wedding banquet.”

Why does the master withdraw from the wedding? Why does he leave early? Why? Because he cares about his household servants. He is at the wedding feast, enjoying himself, eating and drinking with his friends and colleagues. All of whom have servants at home. And while enjoying himself he thinks of his servants, his slaves at home. And because he cares for them, he slips out, and goes home. And to everyone’s surprise (shock! horror!), he takes off his festive outer clothing, girds his robe around his waist with his belt or rope, and calls his servants to the table, where with great joy he waits on them.

That is why we are to live in a state of readiness. When Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, comes He is going to pull off the great surprise, the great reversal. We are girded and ready to serve Him. But before we can even make a move, He comes into the room and begins to serve us!

Unheard of! But is this not what we see Him doing the whole time He was on earth as one of us? Did He not live His whole earthly “career” as a servant, adopting the posture of the lowest of the low? Why?

Just before taking His final steps toward Jerusalem, He articulated the great reversal of His kingdom. He told the disciples that whereas the great ones in the old humanity “lord it over” others, the great ones in the new humanity will serve others. “Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44). And then Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man ...” Even. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many.” No one ever connected the title “Son of Man” with the verb “serve.” The connection was inconceivable. The Son of Man is the One to Whom all the kingdoms of the world are given. The Son of Man is the One before Whom every knee shall bow. He is to be served ... by all. “Even ...” Even. “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served ...” The Son of Man came to serve. To give His life for the life of the world.

Then a few days after entering Jerusalem, to the shouts, “Hosanna to the King,” Jesus was at dinner with His disciples. They are all reclining at the table, expecting to be waited on by the household slaves. Jesus repeats what He had said before entering the city. “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them...” (Luke 22:25) “But not so with you” (Luke 22:26). Among you – in the kingdom of the true King, in the new humanity of the New Human – “let the leader be the servant.” And then Luke 22:27, another startling word. Jesus asks, “for who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

And you know what then happens. Jesus rises from the supper, He lays aside His outer garments. Takes up a towel. And girds Himself. Not with a belt or rope, but with the towel. And washes His disciples feet (John 13).

For years I would read that story and want to say to Jesus, “what are You doing? This is so incongruous. This is so beneath Your dignity. Are You forgetting Who You are? You are the Lord. You are the Lord of lords and ladies. You are the Son of Man. Have You forgotten Who You are?”

And Jesus looks at me ... actually, He looks up at me, because He has taken a place lower than me .. and He says, “No, I have not forgotten Who I am. No, I am not confused about Who I am. I am the Lord. It is just that you have the wrong idea about what it means to be Lord. This is what it means to be Lord. To be Lord means to be servant.”

This is what gripped the mind and heart of the apostle Paul. And why he could write that great hymn Monica cited at the beginning of worship today. Philippians 2:5-11. “Have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus.” Think like Jesus. “Who because He was in the form of God.” For years that was translated, “Who although He was in the form of God.” Thankfully it is now rendered, “Who because He was in the form of God.” “Did not consider equality with God something to take advantage of, but considered equality with God to be emptying Himself, taking the form of a slave ...” Jesus considers being in the form of God, being equal with God, being God! to mean emptying Himself and living the life of a household slave! Have you ever heard of such a God?

And, says Paul, because Jesus lives the servant life, He is exalted to the highest place, and given the name “Lord.” Note: He is not given the name “Lord” because He is on the Throne. He is given the name “Lord” because He left the Throne and lived as a servant. He is given the name “Lord” because in living as servant He has clearly revealed that He understands what it means to be Lord!

Girded and ready – surprise! “Truly I say to you, he, the master, will gird himself, and he will wait on his servants.”

Do you see what this all means for us? When Jesus calls us to be ready for His coming by living as servants, He is not calling us to something beneath our dignity. We were created in the image of God. That is, we were created to reflect the nature and character of God. We are, therefore, most fully who we are created to be when we most fully reflect the nature and character of God. In Jesus we see what being God is all about. Servant. There is no other God but the Servant God. There is no other Lord but the Servant Lord. There is no other King but the Servant King. And we are most who we were created to be when we live like Him.

The call to be a servant is not beneath our dignity. It is our dignity! To live as servant is not incongruous with being human. It is what being human in the image of God is finally all about. We are most like God, and, therefore, most who we were made to be, when like God we gird ourselves with a towel and serve the grace of God to others.

We live ready for the coming of the glorious Son of Man simply by gloriously living like the Son of Man. Like Him, waiting on tables and washing feet, putting our lives at the disposal of others.

“Truly I say to you ... the master will gird himself ...” It is not a typo. It is the truth that sets us free.

So, my fellow servants, come to the table where Jesus waits on us, on you, on me. Really? Yes. “Truly I say to you ...”