Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew chapter 24. During these past weeks we've been considering Jesus's teaching about the end of the world and his return. Here's a little thought experiment: If you knew that the world was ending tomorrow, what would you do today? Certainly, there are some (maybe not anyone here—but some) who would try and squeeze the last drops of pleasure out of this life. Max out the credit cards eating the best food, buying the coolest stuff, and having the most fun, because it's all over tomorrow. Again, that's probably (hopefully) not the approach we would take. I think some of us would say, "If I knew the world was ending tomorrow, I'd want to get my family or closest friends together." You'd want to be with those you love most and enter what comes next side by side.

I was in middle school during Y2K, and I don't think my parents thought the world was going to end, but it was a possibility. So, there was no going out for New Year's parties. We all stayed in together. Just in case. I think others here would say, "If I knew the world was ending tomorrow, I'd do everything I could to share the gospel. I'd knock on my neighbor's doors, call everyone I know, get out on the street corner, and plead with people to believe in Jesus." Others might find the knowledge of the impending end quite difficult. And perhaps the uncertainty, and the fear, would leave you paralyzed, unsure what to do at all.

It's an interesting question: If you knew the world was ending tomorrow, what would you do today? Well, here's a quote attributed to Martin Luther (though I'm not sure he ever actually said it): "If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world… I would plant a tree." Whether Luther said those words or not, I like the quote. Because, while it's probably a little tongue-in-cheek, it gets at something that should be true of God's people. As Christians, we are called to live with the expectation that our Lord could return at any time. It could happen tomorrow. And sometimes, people hear this component of the Christian faith, and they make an accusation. They say, "You Christians are so heavenly-minded, that you're no earthly good. You're so preoccupied with looking up, waiting for Jesus, that you fail to look around, and deal with the immediate issues of life in this world."

You've probably heard something like this before. And it's certainly possible that there are instances in which the critique may be valid. But it's neither a fair nor accurate accusation. Because, as we'll see in our passage today, and again in our passage next week, Jesus has called his people to be very heavenly minded… *And* to engage in all kinds of earthly good. As citizens of his heavenly kingdom, he calls us to live as his ambassadors here and now, blessing others and bringing him glory. This is why Christians throughout the centuries have planted trees, built hospitals, pursued justice, established churches, and engaged in a million different noble pursuits. Because we know, even if Jesus comes tomorrow, he calls us to pursue faithfulness today. And that's what this passage is all about.

In three parables, Jesus is going to show us what it looks like to live faithfully until he comes. We'll walk through each parable, considering the point of each story, and applications for our lives now. The first parable is all about…

1. Faithful service

Look at verses 45-47: *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 will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions* (Matthew 24:45-47).

I know that we don't live in a context of masters and servants, but perhaps we can picture a large British estate from centuries ago with a Duke and his Dutchess or a Lord and his Lady in charge. And the master sets off on a journey. But before he goes, he takes one of the servants aside and says, "I'm putting you in change while I'm gone. Take care of the place and take care of your fellow servants. Make sure they have what they need to thrive, especially their food." When the master returns and finds the house in good order and the servants well-fed, will he not reward that faithful servant he left in charge? Of course!

But, Jesus says in verses 48-51: *But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, 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 cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Matthew 24:48-51). Here is the exact opposite scenario. This is not a faithful servant. This is a wicked servant. And when the master leaves, instead of blessing his fellow servants, he beats them. Instead of feeding them, he gorges himself and opens the wine cellars to worthless fellows. He rules like a tyrant, and parties like a fool. But then suddenly, on a day he did not expect the master returns.

What will happen? If this were a normal story, we might expect Jesus to say, "the master fired that servant!" But this is not a normal story, it is a parable about the kingdom, and the intensity of the master's reaction reflects the reality of the Lord's judgement. Those who mistreat his people, and run head-first into immorality, will face the Lord's wrath when he comes. So church, our call as Christ's people, is to faithful service. To take whatever opportunities he gives us, whatever positions of influence he entrusts to us, and to bless his people and build them up.

And there are so many applications we could consider but given the emphasis on feeding our fellow servants in this parable, let's think about the way we feed our fellow servants within the church. In Matthew 4:4, Jesus reminds us that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Therefore, one of the greatest ways we can serve each other is by nourishing one another with the word. You don't have to be a preacher to do this! This is central to the work of LIFE Group leaders, Sunday School teachers, mentors, parents, friends. What can you do to bring God's word to God's people? To nourish souls with the truth of Scripture? That is faithful service.

We recently added a new member to our family: Bongo the beta fish. He's our first pet. And I've loved watching our kids take part in caring for him, by dropping a few little pellets of food into his tank each day. It may seem like such a small thing, and it's simple enough for even a child to participate, but it's keeping Bongo alive! And church family, reading a Bible verse to a fellow believer, or offering a short lesson at Awana or Youth Group… It might seem like such a small thing, but it's keeping people alive! The Word of God is the nourishment our souls always need. So, while you wait for Christ to come, ask yourself, "How can I serve the people God has put around me?" And specifically, "How can I give them the food they need most: the word of God?" This first parable is all about faithful service. The second is about…

2. Faithful preparation

The parable begins in chapter 25, verses 1-2: *Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise* (Matthew 25:1-2).

In the last parable we needed to imagine a household full of servants. Here we need to imagine a wedding. The guests are gathered, probably at someone's house. They are anticipating the arrival of the groom, and they've prepared a special welcome. Ten women have been given lamps, and their job is to meet the groom as he arrives and light his way into the ceremony. Maybe you've been to a wedding with a sparkler send-off. The happy couple leaves the reception through a tunnel of sparklers as everyone cheers. This is sort of like that only it's at the beginning of the festivities, rather than the end. But notice, Jesus says, in this group of ten women, five were foolish and five were wise. What makes the difference?

For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept (Matthew 25:3-5). The lamps needed oil to burn. And five of the women bring extra oil, just in case the groom arrives later than expected, but the other five don't. And there is a delay, long enough that their lamps burn out, and they all fall asleep. But then, suddenly, the groom arrives! *But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out'* (Matthew 25:6-8).

Ok everyone, it's time! Light the lamps! But they're in the dark, only five lamps begin to shine, because five of the women already used up their oil! And they ask the others if they have extra to spare. But… *But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut* (Matthew 25:9-10). They missed the moment! They weren't ready. And now the wedding feast has begun.

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you' (Matthew 25:11-12). Again, if this were a true story, you might wonder, what's wrong with this groom? Why not let them in? What does he mean he doesn't know them? But remember, this is a parable, and just like the last parable, the intensity of the ending is pointing to a crucial reality. Jesus is talking about his impending return. And he's saying, if you're not ready, if you have not faithfully prepared, you will remain outside the kingdom when it comes in full. *Watch therefore,* he says in verse 13, *for you know neither the day nor the hour* (Matthew 25:13).

So how do we apply this parable? Well, what was the mistake that five of the women made in this story? They did not account for the possibility of a delay. They assumed the groom would come right away. And when it took longer than expected, they were not prepared. I believe there's a word of warning here for the new believer. You have professed faith in Jesus, you have committed yourself to following him, are you prepared to endure? Back in Matthew 24, Jesus spoke of the many challenges his people will face in this life, and then he said in verse 13: *But the one who endures to the end will be saved* (Matthew 24:13). Christianity is so much more than making a decision to believe in Jesus. True Christianity is a life spent walking with the Lord and waiting on the Lord. And God has given us everything we need to endure. There's plenty of oil! The question is: Are you preparing for the long-haul, by tapping into that supply.

We've spoken of the necessity of feeding our souls on the Word. Are you nourishing your spiritual life by spending time in the Scriptures? Are you leaning into the access to help and strength God has given you in prayer? Are you depending upon the power and presence of his

Holy Spirit? What about the encouragement and support of his people? Eugene Peterson famously described the Christian life as a long obedience in the same direction. Are you taking everything you need for that journey? Or are you only thinking about today? This is what faithful living looks like as we await Christ's return:

- Faithful service
- Faithful preparation
- And lastly…

3. Faithful stewardship

Look at verses 14-15: *For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away* (Matthew 25:14-15).

In the parable the word talent doesn't refer to a special ability, but to a sum of money, and a very large sum of money. A talent was roughly 20-years' worth of wages. In our context, this is over a million dollars. And that's just one talent! But one of these guys gets five, another two, and another one. In each case the master has entrusted them with very significant funds. And here's what they do… *He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money* (Matthew 25:16-18).

Two of the men take the master's resources, they put the money to work and double the amount. The third does nothing. *Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master'* (Matthew 25:19-21). This man has faithfully stewarded what was entrusted to him, and as a result, he is given even more and invited into the joy of his master's presence. The exact same scene repeats with the man who multiplied two talents into four.

But then comes the third man. *He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours'* (Matthew 25:24-25). He hasn't squandered the money. He hasn't lost it. But he hasn't done anything with it. And the master is not pleased. *But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest* (Matthew 25:26-27).

So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:28-30). Just like the other two parables, it's an extreme ending because Jesus is using a little story to speak to a huge issue. The issue is stewardship. What are we doing with the talents God has given to us? That's the question. And given the financial theme of this parable, surely, we should ask ourselves, "What am I doing with the money God has entrusted to me?" But we can press the question further…

wider… asking… What am I doing with the influence God has given me, the mind God has given me, the job God has given me, the home God has given me, the abilities God has given me, the time God has given me, the life God has given me? Am I burying these things in the ground, doing nothing of consequence? Or, perhaps, am I using them, even enjoying them, but only for myself? Or am I stewarding what God has entrusted to me for the advance of his kingdom and the glory of his Son? It's a radically counter-cultural question.

We live in the age of the sovereign self, in which self-indulgence and self-glory reign supreme. Just watch the commercials as we head toward Christmas. If you dropped into our culture from another universe, and you knew nothing about Christmas, what would you think this holiday is all about? Us! The stuff we can get! And even when the commercial is about giving, often it's still about us. Kristen and I saw a commercial the other night, and the message basically amounted to "shop at our store, and you'll be the greatest gift-giver of all time." Your family will love you. Your friends will envy you. You'll be so awesome. But the point of this parable, and the point of the Bible, is that we're not the point. We are stewards, entrusted with a life full of blessings, blessings God intends us to invest for his glory. If we do nothing, if we effectively bury it all in the ground, we will give an account for that decision one day. But if we invest, if we aim to use what God has given for the advance of his purposes, we will stand before him one day and hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master."

There are a thousand different ways to apply this, each unique to our personal situation and circumstances, but here's the question I'd invite you to ponder. On your own, with your Life Group, your spouse, or a trusted friend, what has God given me to steward? And how can I invest this trust in ways that will advance his purposes and bring him glory? Because church, this is how Jesus calls us to live until he returns. Faithfully serving his people. Faithfully preparing for his arrival. And faithfully stewarding all he has given to us.

Conclusion

Now, in this last moment, I want to consider one final question. In the parable of the talents, what went wrong with that last servant? Why did he bury the money? There are all kinds of reasons we might fail to invest what God has given to us. What was the issue for this guy? Well, the master calls him wicked and slothful. So, he had some serious problems within his heart. But also notice what he thought about the master.

Master, I knew you to be a hard man… (Matthew 25:24). This servant considered his master hard, harsh, and impossible to please. So, he attempts nothing, because he assumed his efforts would fall short and he would only end up in trouble. And I wonder, if it might be that this is the way some of us think about God. We know he's called us to faithfulness, faithful service, faithful preparation, and faithful stewardship. But no matter what we do, we never feel like it's enough. We are gripped by a sense of inadequacy, crushed by a burden of guilt, and sometimes, whether we would say it out loud or not, we think, "God must be very displeased with me." Because, if we're honest, we think God is hard, harsh, and impossible to please.

Friend, if that's what you think, let me remind you today that in Christ, God is not only our Master… he is our Father. He sent his Son into this world, to save us from all our sin and shame, to make us his children! And as a good Father, a perfect Father, he takes real delight in the efforts his children exert to honor him, imperfect as those efforts may be! He is not a hard man. He is a good and gracious God. Rest in his grace today. And then run, unhindered, after a life that honors him. Serving Christ, the Savior, until he comes again.