

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Twenty-Third Sunday After Trinity, November 12, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 479, 327:1, 609, 605:1-4, 605:5.

Lessons: Revelation 22:12-21, Luke 22:24-30.

Sermon Text: Mark 13: 33-37.

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

Dear friends in Christ:

As we approach the end of the Church Year we are reminded of the end of the world and Christ's return. So we are told in our text to watch for it. To be watchful is a warning often given in the Bible for various reasons. For example, the Bible says: ***"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."*** Luke 12:15 In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us: ***"Watch out for false prophets."*** Matthew 7:15 Pastors are told: ***"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."*** I Timothy 4:16 All believers are told: ***"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."*** Colossians 4:2

It is especially in regard to the Last Day and the second coming of Christ that the Bible tells us to be watchful. In the Gospel of Luke we read: ***"Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."*** Luke 21:36

Therefore, we take these words of our text as our theme for this Sunday:

"BE ON GUARD! BE ALERT! ... WATCH!"

We consider

- 1. Why we should ever be on the alert for Jesus' return , and,**
- 2. How we may be watchful in spiritual matters.**

Our text is the conclusion of Jesus' Mt. Olivet discourse. Jesus says: ***"Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come."*** Not only does the Bible not tell us when the Last Day will be, it specifically tells us that we ***"do not know when that time will come."*** To emphasize this fact, just before our text Jesus says: ***"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*** (Mark 13:32) Even Jesus who is the true God, according to his human nature in the state of humiliation, did not make use of this knowledge. In the state of humiliation, living as a humble servant of God, Jesus renounced his right to that knowledge.

Think, then, of how presumptuous and foolish it is for mere human beings to set a date for Jesus' coming on the Last Day! Through the years various religious bodies have set dates for the return of Jesus. The founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Charles T. Russell, taught that Jesus' coming took place in October, 1874. Later that was changed to 1914. When it did not happen, a different explanation was given for what took place in that year. The Seventh-Day Adventists in their early years set the date of 1844 for Jesus to begin his so-called investigative judgment and his visible coming was supposed to take place soon after that. The Millennialist dreamers insert a thousand years between Christ's second coming and the end of the world. According to such false teachings, the date of the end of the world would not be unknown. Such teachings are not only useless, but also wickedly contrary to what Jesus teaches in our text. Also in the Gospel of Matthew we read these words of Jesus: ***"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."*** (Matthew 24:42, 44)

Unbelievers think it is all a big joke to teach about the end of the world and Jesus' coming on the Last Day. We must be on our guard against their opinions lest we be influenced by them. Peter writes: ***"First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires."***

They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." (2 Peter 3:3–7) Let us be on our guard against such scoffers. Whatever God's Word says about the future will happen.

Since we are warned to be on guard, be on the alert, and to be watchful, for the Last Day when our Savior returns, we want to also learn how we may be watchful in spiritual matters.

2.

As was Jesus' custom when teaching spiritual truths, the Savior told a little parable: ***"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."*** So also our Lord Jesus went away. He removed his visible presence from us when he ascended into heaven. So also the Lord has given us as believers gifts and abilities to do the work as his servants to spread the Gospel, each with his assigned work.

The emphasis, however, of the parable is this: ***"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. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping."*** The warning, then, is not to be spiritually asleep. To be spiritually asleep means to be unconcerned about our spiritual welfare, whether we have faith in Jesus or not. It means to be unconcerned about the coming of Christ on the Last Day. To be spiritually asleep means to think that everything is going along fine and that the Last Day is a long way off. It's the idea that there is always plenty of time in the future to be concerned about God's Word and our salvation. Paul says of such people: ***"While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."*** Then Paul exhorts us: ***"So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled."*** (1 Thessalonians 5:3,6)

How, then, can we be watchful and on the alert for the Last Day? Of primary importance is that we be not so concerned with the things of this life so as to ignore or neglect the spiritual things. That means for you of school age that you must be more concerned about learning spiritual truths from the Bible than in getting a secular education for the few fleeting years you spend on this earth. It means for those who are beyond school age, that they must be more concerned about their soul's nourishment than with what they are going to eat and wear. Jesus says: ***"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*** (Matthew 6:31–33) To be watchful and alert for the coming of the Lord on the Last Day means to be heavenly-minded instead of being world-minded. This is what Paul says to believers in Christ: ***"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."*** (Colossians 3:1–2)

Among those who call themselves Christians, that is, believers in Christ, there are very few who give evidence in their speech and manner of living that they are heavenly-minded. Most are content to let the pastor and Christian teachers take care of the spiritual matters while they concern themselves with the things of this world. Now, it is true that the pastor especially has a responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the souls under his care because of his office of the ministry. Pastors may be likened to watchmen on Zion's walls who are to alert others to any dangers. But Jesus specifically says in our text: ***"What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"*** All of us are to be watchful and not spiritually asleep. All of us are to be heavenly-minded, not worldly-minded.

In all this, the Holy Spirit has to supply the spiritual strength to us. Left to ourselves, we will only go astray, follow the ways of the world, and live to please our sinful desires. And Satan always works mightily to have us do just that. We, then, need to remember that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts only in one way – through the means of grace which is the Gospel in word and sacrament. The WORK of God is accomplished through the WORD of God. This work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel Word is called the work of sanctification. Jesus prayed for his followers: ***"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."*** John 17:17 It is

most necessary, then, to give faithful attention to reading the Bible at home, and attendance at public worship services. If we neglect the use of the Word of God, we are endangering our soul's salvation.

If we ourselves are well-nourished with the Word of Christ, we can be performing some specific duties of Christians that will also be helpful to others. One thing is that we can speak to others about the Savior and how he kept all the Law for us, suffered and died for our transgressions, and rose again. Another thing is that we pray, not only for our needs, but for other people's needs. Surely we should pray for our loved ones that they believe in Jesus, abide in the true faith in Jesus and finally go to heaven. And we should also pray that Christ's work of ruling in the heart through the Gospel come to many more people, even as our Lord taught us to pray: ***"Thy kingdom come."*** Luke 11:2 Paul exhorts us: ***"Pray continually."*** I Thess. 5:17 Again, he exhorts us: ***"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."*** (Ephesians 6:18) James exhorts us to pray for the sick and gives this encouraging truth: ***"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."*** (James 5:16)

We can't pray if we are worldly-minded nor will we have any desire to pray then. Jesus therefore says: ***"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap."*** (Luke 21:34)

Peter also exhorts us: ***"The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray."*** (1 Peter 4:7)

Jude encourages us to pay attention to what the other apostles have said, ***"They said to you, 'In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.' These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life."*** (Jude 18-21.)

May the Lord give us the will and the strength to obey all these exhortations.

Amen.

(Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for November 22, 1987)

CORRECTION: The printed Ministry By Mail sent out had the incorrect author of this sermon. Pastor M. H. Eibs prepared this sermon.