

Bethany Presbyterian Church

4 March 2018

Matthew 26:41

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: in your covenant faithfulness, send forth the fire of your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of your Holy Word; that your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to you, the one and only True and living God; through Jesus Christ who is our eternal prophet, priest, and king. Amen.

WATCHING AND PRAYING

Spiritual alertness and prayer are essential to successful Christian living. The Bible often warns against being spiritual asleep, inattentive, indifferent. It calls upon us to be spiritually alert, morally awake; and in order to be so we are told to watch and pray. Jesus used this expression several times: "Watch and pray!" It is alert praying that will help us follow the Lord and do his will, for the right kind of praying will keep us awake. These words of our Lord apply to all of life; we are to watch and pray.

What are we to watch?

Ourselves. "Take heed, watch" Jesus said in Mark 13:33. Again he said, "Take heed to yourselves" (v. 9). We are often warned today: "Watch your step!" or "Watch out!" What are to watch about ourselves? We must guard against wrong thoughts, unclean, impure, lustful thoughts. We must avoid the attitudes of envy, jealousy, mistrust, hatred, suspicion, arrogance, pessimism, depression, and despair. The right kind of praying will help us cultivate the right kind of thoughts and attitudes. When we have an attitude of adoration, admiration, loyalty, and commitment in our relationship to Christ. Our thoughts mold our character and govern our action. Bernard of Clairvaux centuries ago declared the very thought of Jesus filled his breast with sweetness. Prayer will help us watch our attitudes.

Prayer will also help us watch our words. We must think twice before we speak – not speak twice before we think. We should say only what is kind, trustful, helpful, and fitting; not what is critical, harsh, unjust, and rude. Prayer will help us guard our lips. The Lord's brother James warned against the uncontrolled tongue:

For we all make many mistakes, and if anyone makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body also. If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! (James 3:2-5).

James goes on to describe the tongue as a fire that no man can tame without divine help. It is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. ... My brethren, this ought not to be so" (vv. 8-10). Our Lord Jesus said: "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36, 37). We are to watch and pray in order to speak the right words and use our tongues to bless and praise God and not to curse men.

We are to watch our deeds also. If our thoughts and words are right, our deeds will be right. So the right kind of praying will help to take heed of ourselves and guard our thoughts, attitudes, words, and deeds.

The right kind of praying will also help us to watch other people in the right way. Jesus warned against false prophets, saying, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). We must be on our guard against such prophets. Some are false because their information is false. They are ignorant of the truth, having misread and

misunderstood the Holy Scriptures. Their intentions may be good, but they are false leaders. Some are false because they are evil. They are false in character and are, according to Jesus, “false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15). They may do spectacular things, but they are hypocrites. We must stay mentally and morally awake when we read or hear the words of these false prophets. We must not swallow the half-baked ideas of religious fanatics, but are to read the Bible carefully, prayerfully, alertly, and intelligently.

We are also to watch for good prophets. These are good Christians, who are teaching and preaching the word of God in truth and love. They are looking for and earnestly waiting for the appearance of our Lord.

We are to be on watch also for opportunities to do good. We are not to fold our arms in idleness to await the Lord’s return, like some in Thessalonica did. The Lord has given his servants charge over his work and has commanded “the doorkeeper to be on watch” (Mark 13:34). We must stay busy about the Lord’s work and keep preaching the true gospel to all nations before his return (v. 10). Watchful prayer will help us do this.

We are to expect persecution, for Jesus said to his disciples:

But take heed to yourselves; for they deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. ... And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. ... But he who endured to the end will be saved. (vv. 9, 11, 13).

Only the right kind of praying will prepare us for victory over persecution.

We are to watch world events. The disciples had remarked to the Lord about the magnificent buildings of the Temple, but Jesus told them that one day the Temple would be destroyed. When they asked him when this would take place, he answered:

Take heed that no one lead you astray. ... And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the sufferings (vv. 5, 7, 8).

The destruction of Jerusalem would be only a symbol of his Second Coming. Today we are to see and to interpret world events in the light of the New Testament teachings, and thus see God's purpose in history. We are to have faith in his love and wisdom, knowing assuredly that he will gain the victory and that the Christian will share in that victory.

We are to watch for the coming again of the Lord Jesus. One day if we are still alive we "will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (v. 26).

Jesus goes on to say,

But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; ... for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning – lest he come and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: "Watch" (vv. 32, 33, 35-37).

The most significant words of Jesus concerning his Second Coming are "Watch and Pray!" Only watchful and alert praying will keep us ready for his return.

Why are we to watch and pray? Lest we enter into temptation. In Gethsemane Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go yonder and pray" (26:36). He took Peter, James, and John with him a little farther into the garden and said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me" (v. 38). He prayed as he faced his cross, but the disciples fell asleep. When he found them sleeping, he said to Peter,

“So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (vv. 40, 41). He went to pray again, and again they fell asleep. They failed him in his hour of crisis, because they did not watch and pray. He said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (v. 45).

An alert attitude of prayer will help us resist and overcome temptation. The devil is subtle and cunning and will take advantage of us if he catches us off guard, if he finds us in the wrong place or with the wrong crowd. Prayer opens the windows of heaven for us and lets the divine power of God come to our aid. Prayer will keep us from doubt, despair, and pessimism. It will keep us on the watch, and wide-awake. Jesus recognized the weakness of the flesh, but prayer will help us overcome that weakness.

Jesus often warned that if we fail to watch, we might be surprised by the unexpected. He warned his disciples to be ever alert and watch and pray lest he return and finds them unprepared to receive him. “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Therefore you must also be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matthew 24:42, 44). To be prepared *now* is to be ready *then*. This is the chief teaching of Jesus about the time of his Second Coming: We are to “watch and pray!”

It is interesting to note that Jesus places watching and praying together. Unless we pray, our watching will be in the wrong direction, and we may be watching for the wrong things. The upward look of prayer will keep our eyes in the right direction and our hearts in the right place.

Unless we pray, our watching will be halfhearted and unfaithful. Prayer will keep us from going to sleep when we should stay awake, and from growing careless when we should be alert. Praying will help us interpret correctly what we see. We shall be able to discern the signs of the times, and God will show us the meaning of history.

Prayer helps us prepare for the glad day when our Lord will return or for our own going home to be with the Lord forever. It will keep us centered on God's will and purpose, and from being so absorbed in material things that we cannot see the spiritual.

The New Testament plainly teaches that Jesus is coming to earth again. He may come today, tomorrow, or a thousand years from now. But we shall all be brought into his presence whenever he comes or when we die, and that may be at any moment. It cannot be far away for many. So Jesus says to every one of us through the Holy Spirit: "Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33).

Let Us Pray

In the midst of life, O Lord, we are surrounded by death: the death of hope, the death of desire, the death of ambition, the death of innocence, the death of programs, the death of institutions, the death of promises, the death of those we love, the death that works in our own bodies. Therefore we give you thanks for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose message is not death but life, the life of the Spirit, the life of dreams, the life of faith, the life of love, the life of justice, life for the small people of the world, life for the meek, life for the broken and rejected, life for the diseased and afflicted, life for our dear ones, life for us. Help us to turn our backs on death as negation and discover it as affirmation: dying into Christ, dying to self, dying to false ambitions, dying to pride, dying to loneliness and sin; living for Christ, living for those around us, living for the world, living for the environment, living for the Kingdom, living to the utmost. Teach us to live every moment of our lives. Let the Christ of the empty tomb make empty tombs of all our defeats. Come and reign over us, Ancient of Days, now and evermore, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Master, Savior, and Redeemer. Amen.