**The Gospel of Mark**

**Witness to the Son of God #8**

**The Parables of the Gospel, Part 6**

**Keeping Watch - Mark 13:33-37**

***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 their 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*** *If he comes suddenly do not let him find you sleeping.* ***37*** *What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'”*

**Notes and Studies**

1. The key word in this passage is “*Watch*” (verse 37). Jesus compares His going away as to a man who takes a long journey and leaves his servants to watch over things while he is gone (verses 33-34). Jesus has left the earth to go to His Father and left His disciples with the responsibility of guarding the house and to be ready to open the door when He returns.

2. These disciples could well represent the Christian who lives faith daily.

3. The Day of the return is not known.

4. Jesus shared with His followers the signs of the end time. He said that there will be false Christs and false prophets who will try to deceived people. There will be terrible tribulation: the stars of Heaven will fall and other devastating events will occur.

**Jesus goes to a Far Country**

In this parable, Jesus uses the character of a Master going away to a foreign country, to illustrate His ascending to Heaven and leaving earth behind until the Second Coming. At that time of his speaking, Jesus was still with the people, but today Jesus has in fact gone to a far country. This is no longer just the topic of a parable. It says in the Scriptures just before this passage, concerning the Day of His second coming; that we cannot know exactly when Jesus will return.

In Matthew 24:36 Jesus said*“But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.”*

The plea of Jesus follows: *“Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. Therefore, you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”*(Matthew 24:42 and 44)

In several parables, Jesus talks about leaving people in charge. In the “Parable of the Talents” and the “Parable of the Ten Minas,” He speaks about going away and leaving us to do something good and faithful while He is gone. In the “Parable of the Five Foolish Virgins,” people were waiting for the bridegroom, whose return was delayed. In the “Parable of the Wedding Feast,” the King sent out for people to come to his feast, but they all had their excuses! In this parable, Jesus was telling the people that He would be going and then returning some time later, pointing people towards His imminent return.

Another parable tells of the wise and faithful servant who is doing what his master commanded him to do. It also tells of the evil servant who is treating people badly and recklessly drinking too much. Sadly, many Christians live a lifestyle where there is not much difference between them and the non-Christians in the world. This is not the way we should be behaving when the Master returns.

I am not laying down the law and condemning people for drinking or having a life that has sin in it. I readily admit that I have lived a wretched life of sin for many years. I personally lived under an indoctrination of judgment and condemnation, which in turn caused me to sin even more! Therefore having been set free, I no longer condemn others. Also, I no longer pretend to be self-righteous in order to be accepted by God.

**Wait and Watch - Old Testament**
From the beginning to the end of scripture we discover stories of people who are compelled to wait and watch.

1. Abraham received the promise that he would become, despite his old age, the father of a son and through that son the father of descendants more numerous than the stars in the night sky. But the fulfillment of that promise was a long time in coming. But he waited, and in time the promise came true.

2. Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph, the wearer of the multi-colored coat, saw in a dream that he would be a powerful man and that his brothers would one day bow down to him in homage. But the realization of that dream came only after a long and the hard time in prison in Egypt. He was sold into slavery by those very brothers, falsely accused of sexual misconduct, humiliated, and finally sent to prison for seven years. Imagine what it must have been like to endure years in an ancient prison – the discomfort, the total lack of privacy, and the terrible food in small amounts, sleeplessness, torture, and above all, hopelessness. This is what Joseph had to wait through before his dream came true in a most unexpected way.

3. The people of Israel were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt, led across the Red Sea by the mighty hand of Moses—and then they waited. A journey that normally would have taken only a few weeks stretched to 40 years as they wandered rather aimlessly through the desert. The book of Exodus frequently gives us indications of what this time of vigil was like: *“The people grumbled against Moses, ‘we are disgusted with this wretched food… Why did you lead us out into this desert to die? Were there not graves enough in Egypt?’”* (Exod 16:2-3) They were hardly models of patience.

4. Noah had to wait, cooped up in the ark with his irritable family and restless animals while the waters slowly retreated.

**Wait and Watch – New Testament**

1. Jesus has to wait till he was 30 years old (Lk3: 22)
2. The apostles had to wait for the Day of Pentecost.

Word from Philemon

“God has no car nor a watch, for a thousand years are like a day.” (2 Peter 3:8)

**Watchfulness as practice**

One of the terms that have been lost is ***Nepsis*** (or *nipsis*; [Greek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_language): νῆψις), which means watchfulness. It is the total awareness and is considered the hallmark of sanctity. It is a state of watchfulness or sobriety acquired following a long period of inner purification

The first step to watchfulness is self-denial as a beginning of cleaning the heart

**Selfish Desires**

The most difficult of all human tasks is to conquer our own selfish desires. Ultimately it is just this "self-discipline" on which our struggle to gain our freedom. As long as our selfish will rules, we cannot pray to the Lord with a pure heart: “your will be done.” If we cannot get rid of our own greatness, neither can we lay ourselves open for real greatness. If we cling to our own freedom, we cannot share in true freedom, where only one will reigns.

The saints' deep secret is this: “do not seek freedom, and freedom will be given you, when you live for the Lord.”

“The earth brings forth thorns and thistles, it is said. By the sweat of his brow, with anguish shall man till it; it is he himself, his own substance. The counsel is to begin with small things, for,” says Ephraim the Syrian, “how can you put out a great fire before you have learned to quench a small one? If you wish to set yourself free from a great suffering, crush the small desires,” said Ephrem. “Thus it does not pay to come to grips with the hard-to-master great vices and bad habits you have acquired without at the same time overcoming your small "innocent" weaknesses: your taste for sweets, your urge to talk, your curiosity, your meddling. For, finally, all our desires, great and small, are built on the same foundation, our unchecked habit of satisfying only our own will.”

It is the life of our will that is destroyed. Since the Fall the will has been running errands exclusively for its own ego. For this reason our warfare is directed against the life of self-will as such. And it should be undertaken without delay or wearying. If you have the urge to ask something, don't ask! If you have the urge to drink two cups of coffee, drink only one! If you have the urge to look at the clock, don't look! If you wish to smoke a cigarette, refrain! If you want to go visiting, stay at home!

This is self-discipline; in this way does one silence, with God's help, one's loud-voiced will.

**Purify my heart**

You are perhaps wondering, is this really necessary? The holy Fathers reply with another question: Do you really think that you can fill a jar with clean water before the old, dirty water has been emptied out? Or do you wish to receive a beloved guest in a room crammed with old trash and junk? No; he who hopes to see the Lord as *he is, purifies himself*, says the apostle John (I John 3:3).

Thus let us purify our heart! Let us throw out all the dusty trash that is stored there; let us scrub the dirty floor, wash the windows and open them, in order that light and air may come into the room we are preparing as a sanctuary for the Lord. Then let us put on clean garments, so that the old musty smell may not cling to us and we find ourselves *thrust out* (Luke 13:28).

May all this be our daily and hourly travail. In this way we are only doing what the Lord Himself commanded us through His holy apostle James, who says: *Purify your hearts* (4:8). And the apostle Paul instructs us to *cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit* (II Corinthians 7:1 KJV). *For from within*, says Christ, *out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and defile the man* (Mark 7:21-3). Therefore He also exhorts the Pharisees: *Cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also* (Matthew 23:26).

**Not for our sake; the forces of man**

 we now follow instructions to begin with the inside, we must keep in mind that we are not in the least cleansing our heart for our own sake. It is not for our own enjoyment that we refurbish and tidy the guest chamber, but in order that the guest may enjoy it. Will he find it pleasant? We ask ourselves. Will he stay? Our every thought is for him.

Then we withdraw and keep in the background and expect no recompense.

There are three kinds of forces in man: the carnal man, who wants to live for his own pleasure, even if it harms others; the natural man, who wants to please both himself and others; and the mature man, who is filled by the Holy Spirit wants to please only God.

The first is lower than human nature, the second is normal, the third is above nature; it is life in Christ given to us by the Spirit

Spiritual man thinks spiritually; his hope is sometime to hear the angels' joy *over one sinner that repent* (Luke 15:10), and that sinner is himself. Such should be your feeling, and in this hope you should labor, for the Lord has bidden us *be perfect even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:48), and to *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (6:33).

Therefore give yourself no rest, allow yourself no peace until you have slain that part within you that belongs to your carnal nature. Make it your purpose to track down every sign of the bestial within you and persecute it relentlessly. *For the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh* (Galatians 5:17).

**The transfer of our love from being only self-love to the love of Christ**

If you move out of your self, whom do you encounter? We meet God and our neighbor. It is for this very reason that denying oneself is a stipulation, and the chief one, for the person who seeks salvation in Christ: only so can the center of our being be moved from self to Christ, who is both God and our neighbor.

This means that all the care, concern, and love that we now lavish on ourselves is then quite naturally and without our noticing it transferred to God and thereby to our fellowmen. Only so is the left hand kept from knowing *what thy right hand doeth, and your alms are actually given in secret* (Matthew 6:3-4).

Until this has come to pass, we cannot *be filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another* (Romans 15:14) in a real, non-material way. Our attempts along this line must be false because they are our own and spring from our will to please ourselves. It is especially necessary to understand this; for otherwise we become easily confused on the road of specious helpfulness and smug well-meaning that leads inevitably to the swamp of self-satisfaction.

Refrain from busying yourself, therefore, with charity bazaars, sewing meetings and other such occupations. Busyness over many things is, in all its forms, chiefly to distract you from your goal. Look within, examine yourself accurately, and you observe that many of these apparently self-giving deeds spring from a need to deafen your conscience: that is, from your uncontrollable habit of satisfying and pleasing yourself (Romans 15:1). There is one way to make a test: if your peace of mind is troubled, if you become dejected or perhaps a little angry if for some reason you have to give up performing the good deed you had planned, then you know that the spring was muddy.

Perhaps you ask, why? Those who are experienced answer: external hindrance and opposition meet only the person who has not yielded his own will to God: and for God an obstacle is unthinkable. A truly unselfish act is not mine, but God's. It cannot be obstructed. Only for my own plans, my own wishes – to study, to work, to rest, eat, or do a service to my fellowman – can some external circumstance "get in the way," and then I am grieved. But for the person who has found the narrow way *that leads to life*, that is, to God, there is only one conceivable hindrance, and that is his own, sinful will. If he now wishes to do something but is not permitted to carry it out, how can he grieve? For the rest he is not making any plans (James 4:13-16).

But this is another of the saints' secrets.

Do not be deceived. A Christian *ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked* (I John 2:6) who did not seek his own will (John 5:30), but, was born on straw, fasted forty days, watched in prayer long nights through, healed the sick, drove out evil spirits, had no place to lay his head, and who finally let himself be spat upon, scourged and crucified.

Think how far you are from that. Ask yourself continually anew: Have I watched in prayer a single night? Have I fasted a single day? Have I driven out a single evil spirit? Have I unresistingly let myself be insulted and beaten? Have I truly *crucified the flesh* (Galatians 5:24), and not sought my own will?

Keep all this freshly in mind.

For what is denying oneself? He who truly denies himself does not ask, Am I happy? Or, Shall I be satisfied? All such questions fall away from you if you truly deny yourself, for by so doing you have also given up your will for either earthly or heavenly happiness.

This obstinate will to personal happiness is the cause of unrest and division in your soul. Give it up and work against it: the rest will be given you without effort.

**Watchfulness and Buddhism**

# Watchfulness in the fathers of the church now is called Mindfulness in the contemporary studies of psychotherapy and has been hijacked by Buddhist Psychotherapists.

1. Contemporary studies of behavioral research literature have discovered this as a clinical tool and named it “mindfulness.” It still is being used to break bad habits and troubling emotions. One psychologist, Kabat-Zinn (2003), defined mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment." The “patient” can focus on the sensory and physical aspects of the present moment, recognize thought patterns, feelings and physical sensations that are occurring and learn to tell the difference between sensations, thoughts and feelings. The “patient” then practices making decisions based on the choices they really want and feel right. It is a way of life not controlled by “pre-conceived” ideas, feelings, and what was judged before. It is a way of liberation

2 Mindfulness clinicians and researchers (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Desbordes, Negi, Pace, Wallace, Raison, & Schwartz, 2012) attribute the mindfulness concept to Buddhist philosophy.It may be noted that the study by Desbordes, et. al. (2012) found that mindful emotional processing would occur in meditative and non-meditative states which were known in Christian Ascetic circles. This suggests that mindfulness-meditation practice may stimulate learning that is not only stimulus or task-specific, and also may bring about lasting changes in brain function and thus may be “process-specific.”

**The Christian origin of mindfulness or rather *nepsis* in the ascetic tradition, which is** the vigilance of the mind and heart [nepsis], which is similar to the cognitive-rational-emotive therapy technique employed by psychologists in helping patients to be “mindful” and thus learn to control their thoughts and feelings. In response to this technique, Beck (2011) writes that “… mindfulness techniques help patients nonjudgmentally observe and accept their internal experiences, without evaluating or trying to change them.” Of course, after such an observation period, challenging and restructuring of the distorted cognitions-automatic thoughts and replacing them with non-distorted cognitions must be done(Morelli, 2006, 2009). Some Cognitive-Behavioral (CBT) researchers and clinicians are actively engaged in integrating mindfulness practices with CBT, (e.g.: McCowen, Reibel and Micozzi, 2010; Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness is also similar to metacognition, that is to say, being knowledgeable and maintaining awareness of experiences individuals have about their own cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979). One way of describing this process is that one is “thinking about one’s thinking.” That is, examining the thoughts themselves.

A vigilance and watchfulness of the mind and heart somewhat similar to the cognitive-rational-emotive therapy technique employed by psychologists in helping patients to be “mindful” and thus learn control of thoughts and feelings is a frequent theme in the writings of the early Fathers of the Eastern Christian Church.

These early Christian spiritual teachers taught their disciples to develop nepsis, that is, to be wakeful and attentive (from the Greek verb nepho: to be vigilant, mindful) to that which was inside and around them. Thus, we also need to practice being completely "present" to our thoughts and surroundings. This is analogous to a military scout at the head of a column, or a busy parent "attending" to their newborn infant (Morelli, 2009).

St. Antony the Great (251-356 AD) said: "…and this is just what we find; for the power of discrimination, scrutinizing all the thoughts and actions of a man, distinguishes and sets aside everything that is base. (Philokalia I, 125) This advice can be applied to all bad habits and feelings. Once we detect a habit that we have that is harmful, or an emotional reaction we have that is damaging to ourselves or others, we can choose to place ourselves “at the head of the column,” to be mindful, watchful, vigilant and to prepare a counteraction: an alternative competing response, a different interpretation of the events around us and a different feeling about the whole incident. This would be applying the technique of Christian mindfulness.

1. An important warning for Christians: there is a profound anthropological and theological chasm between the ethos of mindfulness as practiced by those committed to Buddhism and the nepsis practiced by those committed to Christ. Buddhism rejects any concept of “God,” therefore it could be considered, in Cabezon’s (1999) words, “atheological,” “without theology.” The words “intelligent,” “intelligence,” and “mind” are easily confused in the English language. Beyond that, English translations of the nuanced terms used in the Coptic and in Greek needs some clarification. The Christian ascetic literature testifies to an understanding of the profound difference between mere human knowledge and what is called “noetic,”or “knowledge,” which comes from the “nous” which is the mind and heart united.
2. What is noetic knowledge is the knowledge born in a heart that is the inner life through concrete encounter with God. This happens by the work of the Holy Spirit who gives us the grace of pure thought. St. Paul's injunction in his letter to the Romans (12: 2), “...be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” would be understood by an English reader to refer to the rational mind (reason), where thought are separated from feelings and concerns in the heart.
3. Here is an example, a carpenter lost one of his tools, he suspected his young assistant to have stolen the tool, and whatever the boy said or did the carpenter will say to himself, “this thief boy is behaving in such a way to hide his crime.” Two days later the carpenter discovered that he had put the tool under some wood and the boy is innocent. Then whatever the boy says or did was prove of his innocence. What was lacking in the life or the carpenter?

a. Judgment comes before looking for the lost tool.

b. His accusation was based on his distrust rather on his noetic knowledge, where the mind and the heart are not split into two rooms.

1. So St. Paul is referring to knowledge from the depth of one’s heart, which they would call the nous or noetic mind. St. Gregory of Sinai (*Philokalia* IV, p. 212) explains it this way:

“You cannot be or become spiritually intelligent in the way that is natural to man in his pre-fallen state unless you first attain purity and freedom from corruption. For our purity has been overlaid by a state of sense-dominated mindlessness and our original incorruption by the corruption of the flesh … mere skill in reasoning does not make a person’s intelligence pure, for since the fall our intelligence has been corrupted by evil thoughts … the wisdom of this world … falls far short of real wisdom and contemplation.”

**Christianity differs from Buddhism**

Thus, mindfulness that is separated from God is never a true Christian mindfulness. Here are our objections to the Buddhist way:

1. Buddhism does not accept the unity of the soul and the body as one life, but denies the wholeness of human life. The Mind is not the only high faculty where reason is but there is also “perception” which is the immediate understanding without reasoning. Here is an example: What is bigger: a chapter of a book or a whole book? If we are talking about the same book, then the whole is bigger than a part. This belongs to what we call intuition.
2. The mindful person is enlightened by an illumination from God, through the Holy Spirit, in the depth of the heart and mind, which allows perception of spiritual experience. True and purified reason will burn more brightly, like a light. This works with the power of reasoning but guided by love, not by a pervious knowledge received during the cycles of the “re-incarnation” which is fundamental in Buddhism.

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***Pope’s Notes***

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