

**"PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED"**

**A Sermon By**

**Philip A. C. Clarke**

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
August 6, 1995**

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### INTRODUCTION

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### DEVELOPMENT

"Be prepared"...that's the scout motto, isn't it? "Be prepared". It's also the motto of the follower of Jesus. Be prepared.

It's like the master of a large estate, says Jesus, who goes to a wedding banquet. When he returns home, he expects his servants to be at their posts so that when he knocks at the door, they will open the door immediately for him to come in. And if they are prepared for his coming, then the master will reward them bountifully. They will sit at his table and he himself will serve them. If they are not at their post, the master will deal with that, too. Be ready, counselled Jesus. Be prepared. There is probably no wiser advice than that. Be prepared. It is wise advice in terms of our relationship with Christ. It is wise advice in our everyday lives.

### PREPARATION: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE

First-off, Jesus would have us see that preparation is often the difference between success and failure. This

simple parable taken from the 12th chapter of Luke's Gospel contains one of the great truths of life. People who are prepared have an advantage over those who are not.

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It is not difficult to see that preparation is one of the keys to a successful life in almost any field. Many of our young people will someday be quite successful in their chosen profession. Why? Because they worked hard in school and went out prepared. Some of you will get off to a roaring start in your work this week. Why? Because you've done your homework, you've set your priorities and you know what you must do to make the sale. You're prepared. Preparation, is the difference between the amateur and the pro, the star and the also-ran, the winner and those who trail behind.

Knick fans in the congregation will appreciate that Hubert Davis who lives up here on East 96th Street is already working out at the 92nd Street "Y"... getting ready for another season of basketball. I saw him Monday afternoon and went over and introduced myself to him and invited him to church...so if he shows up one of these August Sundays while I'm away....be prepared to make him feel at home.

Back in late April, I made a point of going over to Bryant Gumbel, the very polished host of NBC's "Today" Show for the past 14 years. It was after the Howard Cosell funeral service that I was presiding over. Gumbel is one who knows about preparation. He says he never gets nervous on the air. His secret is to be overly prepared. It isn't the information he's absorbing that matters so much as the act of getting ready and the knowledge that he has put in the time prepping. Ross Perot booked for Friday? Gumbel will have his staff prepare a massive midweek briefing on Perot, and he'll also do his own outside reading. By the time Perot walks on the set, Gumbel believes himself to be the best person alive to conduct that interview. He says,

"If you try using a psychological trick to convince yourself that you're confident, at some level you'll know it's just a trick. But the confidence that comes from preparation is the real thing."

Put this down as the first point of this three pointer. Preparation is often the difference between success and failure.

PREPARATION: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

In the second place, preparation is sometimes the difference between life and death. In any situation where there is a substantial risk of failure and the cost of failure is high, preparation takes on an even greater urgency. Sometimes it's a case of life and death. Let me share an illustration with you.

A commander in the elite aerial team known as the Blue Angels was giving an account of how important preparation is in that risky enterprise.

Flying the lead plane in a show, this commander felt a sudden thump to his plane's tail. Thinking he had been bumped by another plane, he struggled to keep in line, knowing the formation of the other planes was dependent on him. Hours later at the time of debriefing, he learned of the danger the pilot just behind him at experienced.

What the commander had interpreted as a thump was actually turbulence created by the thrust of a sudden change in the flight pattern of the jet which was following him. It seems the latter's throttle froze in mid-flight, leaving the pilot to make an instantaneous decision. There was only one choice really - to fly straight up and out of the pattern to keep from endangering those around him, which is what he did. He was able to rectify and recover the situation because he was prepared to expect the unexpected. The available reaction time was only seconds but he was ready to respond. Seconds between life and death.

How does one prepare for such critical decisions...decisions where only seconds are given. Study. Study. Study. Practice. Practice. Practice. Train. Train. Train. You do it over and over again until your reflexes respond instinctively. If you have to think before you act, then you're in a bit of trouble. People who excel in any field know just how crucial it is to prepare.

A guitarist who is still thinking, "Now where should I place my fingers on the frets?" is not going to keep up with the band. Or the surgeon who has to think,

"Now where did my textbook say that artery is supposed to be? Let me get my book and look it up...."

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PREPARATION: THE DIFFERENCE IN RECEIVING THE MASTER'S BLESSINGS

And one more point

to make in connection with this. Preparation is the difference in receiving the blessings of the Master.

Jesus is saying this to us in our lesson for today. If the Master finds the servants ready for His coming then He will pour out blessings on them beyond what they can ever imagine. But only if they are prepared. Only if they are to the point in their spiritual lives that they respond instinctively as He would have them respond. And that takes work. It takes practice. It takes a bit of discipline.

And these same principles that apply in our work and in school and in athletics and the arts also apply to our living the Christian life. People who are prepared are better equipped to experience the blessings and the benefits that faith has to offer. And people who are not prepared are at a disadvantage.

For example, we shouldn't have to do much thinking about what's right and what's wrong when we find ourselves being tempted. If we're prepared, right action and right decisions will come naturally. When storm clouds rise and our very being is threatened, we will not collapse spiritually if we are prepared. In other words, preparation is the key to spiritual strength and vitality.

Joseph R. Sizoo was once pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in our national's capital. This was the church that Abraham Lincoln often attended while he was president. Sizoo told how moved he was the first time he held Lincoln's Bible. It was the Bible that Lincoln had heard his mother read when he was a boy. He learned by memory the many verses his mother read to him from that old Bible. It is said that this was the only possession Lincoln took with him from Pigeon Creek to the Sangamon River and on to Washington when he was elected president.

Sizoo said he wondered where the old Book would fall open when he picked it up and so he tried it. It opened to a page well thumb-marked which gave evidence of having been read many, many times. Here is the verse to which Lincoln must have referred on many occasions:

"Fret not thyself because of evil doers. Trust in the  
Lord and do good...delight thyself also in the Lord"  
(Psalm 37, 1,3 and 4)

Those who have studied the life of Lincoln have a pretty good idea what it was that made him one of our great presidents. It was the strength of his character. Lincoln prepared himself for this high office by not only knowing the law of the United States but also by knowing the Law of God. He knew both the Word contained in Scripture and the Word that gives counsel in times of prayer. Lincoln was a man of deep faith. Spiritually, he was prepared. And the key, it seems to me, to receiving the blessings of the Master is found in preparation.

Someone has pointed out that the average reader can read the Bible from beginning to end, cover to cover, in one year if he or she will read it for only twelve minutes a day. Twelve minutes a day. Are you willing to make a commitment of 12 minutes each day to better prepare yourself as a man or woman of God. Who knows what word God might speak to you through a few moments spent each day reading this sacred Word and listening prayerfully for God's counsel for your life. The benefits are great if you are prepared when God issues His call.

Down at Texas A & M University, there's a tradition often spoken of as the Twelfth Man tradition. I read that Texas A & M fans stand through the entire game and they do this because of an experience in their early football history which is worth sharing. In one game things were not going so well for them because of injuries. The A & M Coach ran out of substitutes and, in desperation, turned to the spectators and called down a fan who was standing to go into the game. Ever since then, the students have stood throughout the game. By standing throughout the contest the fans are saying symbolically,

"We're read. We're prepared to do our part!"

The question with which we close is: are you ready to do your part? Are you prepared to go down onto the playing field of life to serve the Risen Master? Will you be ready to greet Him when He knocks on yo r door. Go 1 1/2th from here, remember

- First: Preparation is oftimes the difference between success and failure.
- Second: Preparation is sometimes the difference between life and death.
- Third: Spiritual preparation is most certainly the key to receiving the blessings of the Master. And time spent each day in a bit of Bible reading and in prayer...listening for the voice of God... time spent in worship and fellowship with other Christians can make a profound difference in our lives.

PRAYER

We know, dear Father, that heaven awaits those who are prepared. Let the words of scripture from the lips of our Lord help to prepare each of us for whatever the days may bring.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care....those whom we mention in the privacy of our hearts. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Point out markers, too, on the trails of life for those who have lost their way.

Douse with the cold waters of common sense any who this very day might be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision.

The race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would try to run it well, keeping our eyes on Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.

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TEXT:

"LET YOUR LOINS BE GIRDED AND YOUR LAMPS  
BURNING...AND BE LIKE MEN WHO ARE WAITING  
FOR THEIR MASTER TO COME HOME FROM THE  
MARRIAGE FEAST...SO THAT THEY MAY OPEN TO  
HIM AT ONCE WHEN HE COMES AND KNOCKS.

BLESSED ARE THOSE SERVANTS WHOM THE MASTER  
FINDS AWAKE WHEN HE COMES: TRULY, I SAY TO  
YOU, HE WILL GIRD HIMSELF AND HAVE THEM SIT  
AT TABLE, AND HE WILL COME AND SERVE THEM."

Luke 12: 36 and 37



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