

Keep Watch!

Mark 13:33-37

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Translation into English by Bastian Fähnrich (see Finnish version at p. 6)

Mark 13:33-37

Jesus says: 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!'"

It is being told of a husband and his wife, who came to faith in Finland's 1800-century evangelical revivals. They took the Bible's commandment to saty awake or to keep watch quite literally. They tried by all means to keep themselves and each other awake long into the night, and were unhappy when they found themselves in the morning, however, sleeping.

Jesus commands us to keep watch, not to stay awake physically, at least not primarily. I hope that each of us has slept well last night. Jesus refers to the spiritual wakefulness or watchfulness, of course.

In many texts of the Bible we are told to keep watch.

We can ask the question: What distinguishes the watchful Christian from other people? Perhaps not the outer appearance and not the behaviour, unfortunately, for Christians fall into sin, and often are just like other people who go with the flow. The

most important and most obvious distinguishing feature is the very fact that a Christian prays. A Christian prays for the forgiveness of sins; a Christian turns to God in prayer, who will help him in difficult times in his life, and who will take care of him and carry him through the difficulties.

The kind of person who is asleep, cannot be watchful. Only a person that is already awake, can also keep watch. That is why in the book of Revelation (3:1-6), Jesus calls the sleeping church: "Wake up ...", "Wake up to keep watch." In the same way as the person who remains sitting cannot walk, but first would have to get up and stand up, no one can keep watch if he hasn't been awakened. Only an awakened person, a Christian can keep watch.

About 20 years ago I had an edifying experience. One evening in November there was a heavy snow fall, but the temperature outside was, however, slightly above zero. When I woke up the next morning and looked out of the window, I was very sad when to find out that all the snow had melted, and the green grass had come to the fore under the melted snow. - After some time I heard a voice saying to me, "Daddy, wake up already." My child woke me up and I realised that I had been still asleep. So I had just dreamt of being awake, and that the snow had melted. I thought that I had woken up, but in fact I had been still sleeping. When I actually woke up, I found out – to my relief – that the snow had not melted.

Jesus' command to keep watch is addressed to those people who have woken up or have been awakened - that is, believing Christians whom Jesus calls his own. Jesus did not command the Pharisees, for example, to keep watch; Jesus did not address these words to those who did not want to wake up from the dream or sleep of selfishness or self-sufficiency. It is absurd to say to someone sleeping: Keep watch! No, he must first be woken up!

Jesus commanded us to keep watch. How should a Christian believer relate to such a commandment? We have learned that the Christian lives by grace, and he is not under the law but under the grace and mercy of God.

It is true that we are not saved by fulfilling the commandments of God, but by believing that Jesus has fulfilled the commandments on our behalf. Jesus has already paid our debts, if we believe in him.

For example, the commandment "You shall not murder" or "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour" applies to all people, whether they believe in Christ or not. The commandment to keep watch is a different command than, let's say, the aforementioned two commandments. The commandment to be watchful is about our relationship with God - the latter one is about our relationships with others.

God's law is summed up in the great commandment, "Love God above all things and your neighbour as yourself." Murdering and giving false testimony is about our relationship with others, while the keeping watch, praying, Bible reading, fasting and other activities of our spiritual life are about our relationship with God.

I think that the commandment of being watchful belongs to the first of the ten commandments: "I am the Lord your God, You shall have no other gods." A sinful man fulfills the first commandment by turning to God, and starting to believe in him – that is by waking up. A believer fulfills this commandment by faith and by maintaining the relationship with God – in a word: by being watchful. Keeping watch means to not fall again into sin's sleep. (BTW, "Sin's sleep" is not literally mentioned in the Bible).

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 that Jesus "has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption; that may happen, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'"

This is a tricky thing for us believers: We are commanded to keep watch and pray, and to become holy and grow in faith. In Jesus, however, we have already become holy, and we can believe with absolute certainty that we have been saved because of his merit.

Of course, a Christian does not yet live in heaven with God, but is still living in this world's reality, with fellow human beings. A Christian is indeed a new creation, but the old self has not completely died away. That is why we are told: You are already holy before God, but you will still have to become holy in front of fellow human beings. You are already one hundred percent holy in your relationship to God, but you should get one hundred percent holy also in relation to others.

In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul explains this very clearly in the third chapter: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature; put on compassionate hearts..." (Colossians, 3:3,5+12).

We could continue: you are already holy in God's eyes, therefore, become holy also in the eyes of fellow human beings. You already woke up, you are already awake, so keep awake, stay watchful.

A Christian, therefore, needs the biblical law and the commandments of God in order to know how to love his neighbour. A Christian also needs commandments to

persevere in faith, to read the Bible, to pray, to stay in congregational life; thus, the commandment to keep watch.

Keeping watch is living the faith in order to not fall asleep again, to not fall into sin's sleep.

The ones of us who are driving a car know that the fuel gauge should be monitored from time to time so that the fuel cannot suddenly end. A car surely runs if its tank is filled with fifty litres, or just with half a liter of fuel. We find out about the difference only once the car's tank is completely empty and the engine has died.

Through faith in Jesus we can be absolutely sure of our salvation. I can be absolutely sure that God will keep his promise. But I cannot be absolutely sure about myself. If or when I stay away from congregational life, or stop reading the word of God, or stop praying, I might start to think that I can manage on my own and thus I do not need God at all.

If that happens, then I will give up on God. But God does not give up on me.

However, God does not force us to heaven if we do not want to have a personal relationship with him. We have our own responsibilities, we cannot save ourselves by our deeds and we cannot help God to save us. But only you and me, we can give God permission to save us! The merit of salvation belongs only to Jesus, not to me or us!

Keeping watch or being watchful is to make sure that the tank does not run dry. The Holy Spirit is at work in God's word and the sacraments. We have received God's Holy Spirit in our hearts. Let's be filled with the Holy Spirit, therefore, by listening to or reading the Word of God, by partaking in holy communion, and spending time in prayer before Him.

Let's pray: Father God, thank you that you have given your Holy Spirit into our hearts. Thank you that we can rejoice and be assured of the full salvation which you have given to us through your Son Jesus Christ. We pray to you: do not let our love grow cold to you, but let us watchfully wait and be prepared for your Son's coming. Please help us to keep our faith in the midst of difficulties, suffering and even in times of fear. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Resurrection by John Donne

*Moist with one drop of Thy blood, my dry soul
Shall-though she now be in extreme degree
Too stony hard, and yet too fleshly-be
Freed by that drop, from being starved, hard or foul,
And life by this death abled shall control
Death, whom Thy death slew; nor shall to me
Fear of first or last death bring misery,
If in thy life-book my name thou enroll.
Flesh in that long sleep is not putrified,
But made that there, of which, and for which it was;
Nor can by other means be glorified.
May then sin's sleep and death soon from me pass,
That waked from both, I again risen may
Salute the last and everlasting day.*

See also about awaking: Psalm 17:15.