

Stay Awake

Mark 13:3-13 and Mark 13:32-37

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Good morning, church. It's great to have so many of you here in person and those also who are joining us via livestream. And I am grateful to be with you gathered in God's presence, and knowing that where two or more are gathered, even digitally, the Lord is with us. We know that He is with us because He's promised us. It's not because we will it or wish it. It is the Lord's promise, and that promise is in the real presence of the Lord. And that real presence is the Holy Spirit, y'all. This is the promise of scripture.

The Spirit isn't simply this odd thing that we cooked up theologically. This is the third person of the Trinity. And when God says He is present with His people by His Spirit, the Lord is present. And He's present also in the supper, not because the Spirit is present in the elements. He doesn't need to be. The Spirit is really present, and God is really present in the hearts of those who love Him. This is our reformed tradition, our reformed hope, but also our great and powerful truth. The Spirit works in the hearts of those who believe.

And there is a mystery. It's not that somehow I have only 70 percent of the Holy Spirit when I'm not with you in worship. But there is something that the scriptures say that when two or more are gathered in His name when we're worshipping the Lord, I might say that He is super abundantly present, which means that what we do here is the high-water mark, the greatest act of the believer, gathered with other believers who are beleaguered, broken, hurting, rejoicing, celebrating, healed, and holy. When we are gathered, we offer our voices in prayer and worship, and we come to the word.

It is here that somehow in the mystery of the Godhead that God is delighted to say, "I am with my people here and around the world." And next Sunday, we will remember Pentecost Sunday where the Spirit was poured out, and the church was enflamed in growth. The Lord is still at work today.

We've been in this series on "The Qualities of a Disciple." This week we arrive at the seventh quality, and that is, if you will, to stay awake. Vigilance. But vigilance broadly understood, as you will see this morning as we read about this quality of a disciple mediated through Mark's gospel. And this morning, we're in Mark 13 as we consider this seventh quality of a disciple. A disciple is awake and alert. So what does that look like? So let's look together.

Mark 13:3-13 and then Mark 13:32-37.

And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" And Jesus began to say to them, "See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many 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. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be

proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, 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. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." [ESV]

Then verses 32 and following.

"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." [ESV]

Now, it's not in the passage before you. But if you remember, we were in this passage for several weeks. Now the final one. This is from the words of Jesus as He was telling His disciples about what was to happen to Him. He says, "Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation. The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So brothers and sisters, will you pray with me this morning as we go to His word?

Lord, the darkness of the night has receded, and the light of this new day is on us. We sit waiting to hear what you will uncover from your word. Holy Spirit, renew in us a great fire of love for the Lord Jesus. Speak, Lord. Your servants are listening. Help the teacher. Amen.

At the end of the summer of 1990, I was 20 years old and had just finished my second year doing a youth internship in Tampa, Florida, with the pastor who had led me to know the Lord Jesus. And the drive from Tampa, Florida, back to Irmo, South Carolina is a long one. And so I decided, having been away from home, I really wanted to get home to my mother's cooking. So I decided to leave late night from Tampa and drive all night to get home to Irmo. There's this quiet stretch of highway that connects, if you will, the low country of South Carolina that you know of as 95 that travels all the way to the upstate and goes right through the heart of Columbia and by my hometown of Irmo. It was at least the town not of which I was born, but the town in which I realized who I was as a human being, and that is a small town called Irmo just outside of Columbia. It's at Interstate 26. It's not a huge highway, but it stays relatively busy. It stays busy during the summer because everybody's going or coming from the beach. But I knew that I needed to be prepared for that. That's why I drove through the night.

And so I was on Interstate 26 heading home and not far from Columbia. The sun was coming up at my back, and I was headed west. And I was growing increasingly tired. I did what I think many of us do. At least, I'm about to tell you what I do, and maybe I'm the only one. But I began yelling at myself. I began holding on to the steering wheel, screaming at the top of my lungs to stay awake. I had listened to all my cassette tapes. I was burned out. Yes, those glorious days of mixtapes. I'd been through all of them. And to make matters worse, my Nissan Sentra needed some serious work on the transmission. And so partly, my arm was tired because I had to physically keep it wedged between my seat and the

stick shift to keep it in fifth gear because it kept wanting to pop out, and the only way I could really keep going in overdrive was to keep it lodged there. So my elbow is tired. My wrist is tired. I'm tired. And I'm screaming. I was alone on that highway. No one saw it. But I really wasn't alone.

The screaming wasn't working. The pinching my leg wasn't working. My body and mind was just exhausted. And so finally, in the fast lane, I fell asleep. And so I sit here before you this morning because this is a sermon about staying awake, and I'm telling you about when I didn't. I'm grateful that there were no other cars on the highway that day because not only was my transmission out of whack, but so was my alignment. My alignment on my front wheels would want to force the car to go to the right. And so in my exhaustion and in my sleepiness, my car started merging to the right. And I did not wake up until I was firmly halfway up right in the middle of an exit ramp. And I found myself startled awake, and I realized in that moment exactly what happened. I had fallen completely and utterly asleep, and yet my Lord had not. I very much deserved to be in a ditch at full speed, and yet the Lord preserved me.

So please hear me when I say that this passage is instructing us to stay awake. But our protection, our preservation, our strength is not contingent on our alertness. It is actually contingent on the Lord who knows the end from the beginning and the beginning to the end. But nonetheless, though the Lord has us in His hands and though He has His church firmly within His providential authority, He still calls those who would follow Him to stay awake. So there is work that we must do. There are deep imperatives here, both inferred and nakedly expressed. But I want you to hear the quality of a disciple that Jesus would want us to hear this morning is stay awake. So if you're sleepy, now is a good time for you to stay awake because I'm going to call you out by name.

So let's look together. And in so doing, I want you to see the three things of which Jesus reminds His disciples and us to stay awake for. One is expect persecution. Secondly, fight temptation. And finally, arrange your priorities. Expect persecution, fight temptation, arrange your priorities.

So fight persecution. Jesus says in these verses to His disciples as He was preparing them that they will have persecution to come upon them. But we must understand that what He calls us to is a humble posture in light of that promise, in light of that reality. The Lord Himself is telling us that His church and His servants, for all time until He returns, will inevitably face opposition and persecution for believing and following in His name. True living, true knowledge, and true experience of following Jesus in discipleship inevitably passes through the flames and fire of trial and the temptations that the trial of persecution brings.

In light of that, it would be easy to begin thinking, as I'm sure you are, of the various ways perhaps you are experiencing persecution, ways that you have experienced persecution, ways in which you might consider persecution might come in the future. Perhaps you're doing some form of comparative such as the temptation of falling prey to persecution. You're maybe thinking of what we might be facing here in the United States versus what people might be facing in Iran or China. But it would be easy to get sidetracked to talk about what does the nature of persecution look like. But I don't think that is, if you will, the focus of Jesus's instruction. It has come, it is here, and it will continue to come. Jesus is most concerned not about what the persecution will look like, but what the internal emotional and spiritual life is of the disciple when persecution comes.

And so just quickly, He's seeking to prepare us. And so consider just from these opening verses, verses 3 through 13, He's outlining the ways in which He wants our response to inevitable persecution. Now, just reading them off. First, be on guard. Two, receive it. Three, give your witness to me. Four, Spirit dependence. Five, do not fear. And six, endure.

These are both the explicit and implicit calls that Jesus gives to disciples both in the face of

persecution and even contemplating its possibility. He's calling us to humbly be aware not of what the landscape that persecution will look like or the tensions that it will inevitably bring. Pay attention to what's happening on your inside because each one of these commands and these calls to endure persecution have embedded within them a tension, an intersection where we have to decide, what way will I choose? Will I choose the way in which Jesus is calling me to respond, or will I fall prey to that which is so common to man? 1 Corinthians 10:13.

So let's go back through the list. Be on guard. What is this opposite? Assuming it will not happen. Number two, receive it versus fighting it. How dare you insult my faith? He says receive it. Give your witness to me, number three, versus giving a defense of your name. How dare you offend my rights? No. Give a witness to Him. Spirit dependence versus the inclination to lawyer up. Now, literally, I wouldn't say there's any problem with getting a lawyer, but that's not our dependence. What would the Spirit have me to say in response to direct opposition wherever it might come to my believing and walking as a disciple of Christ? Spirit dependence. Spirit, speak. Speak to my heart that my lips might speak truth to the world.

Do not fear versus living in anxiety and white knuckle anxiety of saying, what if? What about? Rather, do not fear because it's coming. But do not fear. Endure, but giving up is its opposite. I'm going to keep quiet about my faith. I'm going to say, "Yes, but I'm not that kind of Christian." Endure. Do not give up.

Let's go back a few years, if you don't mind, to the 16th century. 16th century is important, particularly as we consider the roots of our presbyterian and reformed heritage because raging in Europe was the Reformation. And the Reformation reached the shores of England, but the English Reformation was slower than it was in other parts of Europe. It came in dribs and drabs, but slowly building to a crescendo. And that crescendo began to be seen under a particular queen, Queen Mary, which you know of through the drink Bloody Mary. Or maybe you know because you remember in history. Raise your hands which one.

As one historian says, "The English Reformation did not gush forth from the earth like a geyser. Rather, it grew slowly and steadily, just as the melting snow on a mountainside, the sins into the valleys where it forms creeks, then streams, then a mighty river that flows silently, slowly along with resistless power." So grew the English Reformation. And in 1553, Queen Mary came to the thrown of England. And immediately, because she was Catholic, she sought to undo everything that the English Reformation had begun to already change. And she took it to the streets, and it would end up right in the center of the city of Oxford from which our story, and my illustration, comes.

There were two particular men in particular. There was Hugh Latimer, who was a well-known preacher, very eloquent in his preaching and unafraid to say the name of Christ and to stand for the orthodoxy of scripture itself. He had a younger and close friend, one who was considered to be the intellectual of the English Reformation, Nicholas Ridley. Nicholas was the intellectual. At this point, Latimer had actually grown into old age. His eloquence had left him. His memory was even growing very weak. Yet he was committed to the cause, but the cause had now arrived at his front doorstep, but not only his but also his younger friend Nicholas Ridley.

On this particular day in 1555, October 16th specifically, the entire town of Oxford—and if you've ever been to the spot where it happened. The entire town of Oxford was in the streets. Young bishop Nicholas Ridley appeared first and looked earnestly at Hugh Latimer. Finally, old Latimer appeared, and Ridley cried out, "Oh, you're here." "Yes," answered Latimer, "as fast as I can follow." The two men embraced each other fondly and knelt together by the stake.

But you need to understand what happened directly preceding that moment. Because they were scholars and pastors, they had their own regalia, Latimer with his preaching robe, which was very elaborate in its Scottish tradition, but also Ridley had his robe as professor and now bishop. But as they reached this spot, they disrobed only into their undergarments, and they gave them away. They weren't wearing the garments because they gained some sense of identity from them, but they understood that they were leading. They were leading in the face of persecution. And they wore into that space to receive it, and to not only receive it, but they were welcoming it. They were enduring it. And they were willing to be disrobed in the middle of the city in which they ministered and talked.

The two men embraced each other, and then both were chained to a heap of wood. And they continued to share sweet fellowship, most of which is lost to history. But after they were chained to the stake, the fire was lit. And old Father Latimer turned to Ridley to encourage his young friend, and he quoted from a sermon that he once preached when he knew Ridley was in the room. He quoted it here, and he said, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out." Both men were burned to the stake that day. If you can hear my words and understand them, if you hold a Bible written in English in your hands, if you believe the great doctrines of the Reformation here this morning, and even if you don't, even if you're not a Presbyterian or a Calvinist, I would suggest if you are a Protestant sitting in these seats this morning, we are doing so as direct descendants of these two men. Not by blood, but through the heritage of their professed faith in enduring persecution. They expected it, but they continued to preach. They received it, but they continued to live.

And one of the untold stories about Ridley was that Ridley actually went to Queen Mary to ask her if he could serve her ministerially. But of course that was rejected. But what's beautiful in that is he knew she was against it. He knew they disagreed. And yet, in enduring the persecution, he sought to give even a gentle answer. He didn't fight it in that sense, but he still stood up for his faith. And they took him.

Expect persecution, believer. But it is Jesus who prepared us, Jesus who warned us, and it would be James who would be inspired by the words of Jesus when he says in his letter in James 1:2, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." That whole idea of "count it all joy" is this verb in Greek. And this word "joy" actually says, "leap for joy." How are we doing in that, church? How are we doing? Is it an opportunity, is it not, to give a gentle answer in the name of Jesus in loving grace and mercy to minister and witness to the name of Jesus whatever might come for His glory alone, that Jesus might be glorified and that some at this moment who are nameless and faceless to us might remember that we, in humble posture and dependence upon the Spirit, not only expected persecution but joyfully received it because it was an opportunity to say, to thine be the glory?

But Jesus doesn't just stop there with regard to how we ought to expect persecution. It is also fight temptation. And when He says in these words, which I read to you, as He was saying to the disciples, "Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation. The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." First, how do we know we're fighting temptation? It's first to understand, do you know what it's like to fight temptation? If you thought to yourself this morning, "I'm kind of good," that's a red flag that you're actually not. Perhaps you've grown dull to the ways in which you are tempted. Perhaps you've given yourself over to sin so much that you rationalize that what you're doing is actually correct, and you and Jesus, you're all good. The reality is fighting temptation as a believer is a constant regular daily reality.

And when we consider the words which were read earlier in the service, it's important to

remember that there are a few verses that lead into it from 1 Corinthians when Paul says,

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.
[ESV]

That's the whole idea of be careful that you're not prideful, that you're not fighting sin because if you don't think you're fighting sin, you're about to fall.

Every day, all day, we face temptation. Temptation is not itself sin. Temptation is the result of the fallen world. And temptation, of course, is that reality. It becomes sin when we nurse it, when we coax it in and invite it in like the pizza guy. "Thanks for delivering pizza today. Want to come in and have a slice with me?" Temptation is that he knocked on your door, but you didn't order the pizza. But he opened it up, and the temptation is right there. "Smells so good. Tell me more. Sausage and pepperoni? Yeah, sounds good to me. It's paid for? That sounds pretty good. Want to come in and have a Coke?" Temptation isn't that pizza came to your doorstep. Temptation turns into sin when we invite it in to sit at our table.

And so he says, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man," like pizza. French fries for me. There we go. "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." And he says, Jesus, believer, and His Holy Spirit, believer, is with you in the moment of temptation, and He's with you in the moment in which you begin to nurse that temptation to make it your own where it even becomes sin. And so Jesus is saying through the apostle Paul that when you are tempted, none of it is a surprise to God because it is common to man. It isn't always because it came from Satan because Satan doesn't need to raise a finger because it's common to man. Our desires rise from within, and the desires and temptations come without. We face it day after day.

Let's consider the words of Lamentations 3. "Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven. We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgotten." So it's saying, test yourself. Have you become a PhD in the ways in which you're easily tempted? Yes. All temptation is common to man, but what's common to you? Do you know the contours in which you are weak and vulnerable? Do you know the patterns that you've allowed to be erected in your life that you've helped construct? Not just what's come from the outside. Do you know it? Because when Jesus calls to His disciples and instructs them to actually pay attention, He's saying, do you know the contours of your own soul? Do you know the desires that well up within you?

Jon Tyson in his book *Beautiful Resistance* reminds us that temptation is all around us and inside us in the form of heart idols and cultural idols. Whether from our hearts or from the vanity fair of the world, we must understand the nature of temptation and sin and humbly acknowledge our capacity to fall prey to every kind of number of temptations, some which look so right to begin with and give the illusion of control, that if we will simply follow this way, freedom is on the other side. And like the words of Bono when he says, "Sweet the sin, but bitter the taste in my mouth." Or the great words of the great English poet W. H. Auden, "Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bread and eats at our own

tables." Even as disciples filled with the Holy Spirit, we have incredible capacity for endurance and trust and grace and love, but also we are still broken, and sin is still present, and our capacity for evil is very profound. And knowing the contours of it in your life is only the beginning of understanding what fighting temptation looks like.

Kate and I are watching a series on Showtime called *Your Honor* with Bryan Cranston who is a judge in New Orleans. I won't give away the show. But there is a moment that only Bryan Cranston, as a great actor of our generation, can navigate without saying one word. In less than 30 seconds, he shows us. As a judge who seeks to fight, even as a judge, against the injustice that he sees in New Orleans, faced with the temptation is he going to protect his son from criminal prosecution and jail time, or is he going to do the right thing and lead his son in righteousness in turning himself in? And so the day comes when he learns that he needs to take his son, backpack in hand, to the police station. And he tells his son to stay in the car while he goes in to make a first initial contact with the office that he had called beforehand. And so he walks into the jail house or into the police station, and he's the only one in the foyer. And he's there only five seconds when he hears a bloodcurdling scream of a woman, which causes him to turn to his right. And down the hallway, he sees the crying of a mother. And embracing this woman is her husband. They are the parents of the victim of his son's crime.

But still, you see that he's ready. And yet, he also realizes in that moment—of which the viewer only comes a realization to this after that moment. But he realizes in that moment not just are they the grieving parents, but it's this particular grieving parent that is the temptation because the father is the leader of one of the largest organized crime families in New Orleans. And in that moment, a judge, a father, sees what he thinks to be the certain future of his son, which will be surely his death. And without saying a word to the camera or to anybody else, he allows temptation right into the front door of his heart. And he goes out to the parking lot, and he tells his son to get in the car and stay there.

And so he leaves what he is certain will be his son's future to what he believes will be the future of protecting his son. But what he cannot see is the myriad decisions that he has now unleashed are to be completely impossible to contain or control. This was the temptation that is common to man for him.

Where are you tempted to control, to protect, even for good reason? Where are you afraid to bring the exposure of your sin? Because I want to tell you—and I need to finish, and I apologize. But I need to say to you that if you are failing today, even this very morning, you have faced temptation, but you have now nursed it, and you have now brought it into yourself. I need to say a word to you. And I want to say a word to all of us who have ears to hear. If you or I or anyone who hears my voice are failing, know that today, the long arms of God's mercy to you and the depth of His love restores you and makes you clean. Because not only are we called to understand the contours of the temptation that so easily ensnares us, our Lord Jesus knows them even better. And He knows them before we're even willing to acknowledge them, and He knows the sin which so easily entangles and makes us captives to its power. And He reminds us this morning that His arms of mercy were stretched wide for our salvation in that great work of double imputation. And the deep arms of His love will renew you today. Today!

And so I ask you, dear friends, to put on your imagination caps. Remind yourself that our imagination when we come into worship is to be restored. And while we're called to fight temptation, I want you to know that the way out is the power and love of God in Jesus Christ. The way out is the power and love of the Holy Spirit, which not only makes us aware of our temptation, but can change you. Thanks be to God. While I still struggle with sin that is common to man, I can also look back and say, "Lord, you met me there, and you renewed me. But now you have changed me, and you have replaced those old desires with the expulsive power of new affections. Nothing that I have done, but only the work of your Spirit." This can be your story because it is the promise of God.

And so I will finish this morning reading to you, with your imaginations fully intact, consider the metaphors, the images which are given to us in this wonderful, glorious Psalm. Psalm 103.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. [ESV]

Go outside today, and see as you lift your head to the skies, how far can you see? Turn your head to the left and to the right, and see how far left to the west or to the right and to the east can you see? I must tell you, God's vision, God's power through Christ, who separates us from our sin as far as the east is from the west, and whose love is far beyond anything we can ever imagine, renews you today. But He also by that same power gives you His Spirit and says, "Fight the good fight. Fight temptation. And I will have mercy, and I will give you grace."

This is the Lord's word. And I will trust I'm going to stop here. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning. We thank you for your word. And though this is not where I intended to stop, I will trust this is where you wanted me to stop. But Lord, this is a good word for us, to expect persecution and to fight temptation. Lord, we confess we grow weary, and we fall asleep. We grow dull and allow temptation to become sin within us. We grumble at persecution, and we seek to escape it. Lord, we are broken and in dire need of healing. But your grace and your mercy is enough. And as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is your steadfast love towards all those who follow you. Lord, we thank you this morning for that steadfast love. Now feed your people by this word and may your Spirit feed us by this supper. In Jesus's name. Amen.