

When I was a little boy, our family worshipped at a fairly strict New England-style church in the suburbs of Boston. One time my mother mentioned to our minister that my brother was especially anxious during Communion, and in terrible fear of Jesus' return and His righteous wrath. Decades later, she was still troubled by his reply: that Communion with God should be a fearful experience, and that maybe a little fear and terror would help keep him on the straight and narrow. There is a stream of Christian thought, a Puritan theology often associated with early American revival preachers, that makes an attempt to so trouble and terrify the listener that they are driven by that fear and panic to repent... for having grievously offended an angry and wrathful holy God, and so the terrified sinner submits to Jesus, to escape the burning anguish and brimstone fires of hell. Early in his ministry, Dwight L. Moody became especially well known for his characteristically fiery and scorching revival-style of preaching. But in 1872, when he attended a Bible conference in London where he heard a powerful sermon based on

John 3:16-17:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Moody later wrote that he was astonished by that sermon's message. Up until then, he had always called on sinners to repent in order to flee from the wrath that was sure to come. But instead of emphasizing what sinners should flee from, that sermon reversed all of that with its focus on rushing toward the gracious invitation of our God who loves us. Moody noted, that without denying God's righteousness and justice, or that grace means there is nothing we're to do in response, the sermon he heard called for heartfelt repentance as a faithful and active response to God's prior love and mercy. I think it's regrettable that many Christians live and act as if God were angry and hesitant to show his mercy and compassion, or as if God had to be placated and cajoled into showing grace. Unfortunately, many preachers portray the second coming of Jesus as a scary and terrifying time of threat and harsh judgement, rather than the fulfilment of grace, hope and promise. When Jesus spoke of his second coming, it was not as a threat, but to encourage those who already believed and followed him as they were suffering under severe conditions of persecution. Truly, the message of the Gospel, is God's Good News for sinners... and when we begin to accept and trust that the Good News is true, and we begin to experience for ourselves how much God really does love us, even just as we are, that becomes the most significant truth of our lives that can redefine and reorient everything about how we live. It is not God's intention for our lives to be defined by guilt and shame, or by fear and regret, nor for us, through good works and religious observance to try and earn God's love or make-up for past mistakes... that all comes from a flawed and deficient understanding of God. Consider this image of God that the prophet Zephaniah describes:

Zephaniah 3:17-19

The Lord is in your midst; you shall fear no more. ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast...

This isn't an angry God poised to pounce in fiery-fierce judgment, but a gracious loving God singing and rejoicing over us, with loud joy and gladness celebrating that we are His... which then raises the question: so why would God be delighted to sing and rejoice over us? Jesus answers that question,

Luke 12:32

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. "little flock"

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that is a term of endearment, promise, and nurture. Jesus is assuring us that it's the Lord's good pleasure or joy, and it is the fulfillment of God's intention and desire, according to His plan and purpose for Creation. "your Father's good pleasure" describes more than just a good feeling, but refers to God's ultimate end and divine will... meaning that the whole point of Creation and humankind is God's planned purpose and pleasure to give us the Kingdom. Jesus frequently refers to that phrase in his teachings & parables, but what exactly does he mean by that term, the Kingdom of God? The kingdom of God actually has several layers of meaning. In the most simple and literal sense, it is the promise of eternal life, and our dwelling-place with God beyond the grave. Jesus also said, however, that the Kingdom of God is at hand. So Kingdom of God also refers to the reign & sovereign rule of God. The Kingdom of God is present when led by the Spirit, we obey, and live out grace, the just and merciful ways of God. When we allow Scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us, that is living under God's reign, that is kingdom-living. e.g. When we choose to forgive, rather than resent or hit back. or when in forbearance, we don't say hurtful words of attack. It is when we pause to think grace before we respond, or when we commit & make sacrifice, and truly live out our faith. The Kingdom is placing the needs of others, ahead of our own. It is giving our time and effort to serve other people. The Kingdom is present as the courage and strength we need to stand for what is right and good, even when others do not. It's when our lives are defined, influenced and guided, not by our own desires, but by God's truth, grace and mercy. The promised kingdom is at hand when a Christian's life faithfully reflects God's gracious love, joy, call and purpose. Yes, the Kingdom of God is the promised and coming of eternal life with God for which we await and hope... and at the same time, it is when in the present life we submit to the gift of grace and respond to the word, ways, will, and leading of God's Holy Spirit. The point is, because it is God's pleasure to give the kingdom, we don't need to live frantic, fearful and anxious lives, because we are freed from trying to satisfy the demands of this world's ways and values, or trying to placate the wrath of an angry God... for God isn't a nit-picking judge eager to pounce and punish us, but a God whose good pleasure and joy is to love and bless us. But in order to receive the full abundance that God intends to give, we must be ABLE and we must be READY to receive and not bogged down or clinging to this world's distractions. So Jesus warns us,

### Luke 12:33-34

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This isn't a universal command for all to sell everything we own, but understood as a warning that our stuff, our possessions can get in the way of our receiving with gratitude the blessings God intends... for if our lives are already filled, clinging this world's stuff then how can we receive with gratitude God's good gifts? So maybe the question is, do I really trust in God, and that God's promises are true?, or am I trying to build my life and security on my own stuff? I want to live in a way that I am always ready to receive, and I want to be captivated by God's gracious love and truth, and to build my life, not driven by fear and guilt, but on promise and joy that it's God's pleasure to give. We are created to be the recipients and receptacles of God's love. We are vessels, whom God has designed for receiving & reflecting love, grace, kindness and blessings back out to all the world. This Luke text is about fulfilling that calling and purpose. First, it has to do with our faith and our attitude... trusting that God is not reluctant, stingy or angry, but is loving, and pleased to bless us, abundantly... and so the promised Kingdom comes as a gracious gift, not as something we need to earn, ... and a life dominated by a desire for more things of this world will limit our ability to recognize and receive God's blessings. Second, it also has to do with living our lives in readiness to receive, by staying focused on our hope in God's truth and promises. Jesus said,

### Luke 12:35-37

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will serve them.

That is a startling picture of the Christian life, lived in response to God's amazing and radical grace, and in hopeful anticipation of what is going to happen when Jesus comes again. The servants have been faithful. They are ready and waiting, and so when the returning Master arrives, he serves them, just as by grace, Jesus suffered and died to serve and save us. The parable describes both what Jesus has done and what he will do when he returns. The longer I walk with God, and the closer my relationship with God grows, the more I am beginning to realize and recognize, the infinite and astounding depth, breadth and height, and power of God's amazing love, mercy and grace, and how overwhelmingly, incredibly wonderful our God really is. It is that truth and grace that we celebrate at the Lord's Table, where we receive and enact signs of His grace and love as God's servants, and yet as Christians, served by God. As the prophet Zephaniah joyfully proclaimed,

The Lord, your God, is in your midst ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing, and will save the lame and gather the outcast... (Zephaniah 3:17~19)