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“Watching”
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. IV sermon 22
St. John Henry Newman
December 3, 1837

"Take ye heed, watch and pray; for ye know not when the time is." Mark xiii. 33.

OUR Saviour gave this warning when He was leaving this world,—leaving it, that is, as far as His visible presence is concerned. He looked forward to the many hundred years which were to pass before He came again. He knew His own purpose and His Father's purpose gradually to leave the world to itself, gradually to withdraw from it the tokens of His gracious presence. He contemplated, as contemplating all things, the neglect of Him which would spread even among his professed followers; the daring disobedience, and the loud words, which would be ventured against Him and His Father by many whom He had regenerated: and the coldness, cowardice, and tolerance of error which would be displayed by others, who did not go so far as to speak or to act against Him. He foresaw the state of the world and the Church, as we see it this day, when His prolonged absence has made it practically thought, that He never will come back in visible presence: and in the {320} text, He mercifully whispers into our ears, not to trust in what we see, not to share in that general unbelief, not to be carried away by the world, but to "take heed, watch [\[Note 1\]](#), pray," and look out for His coming.

Surely this gracious warning should be ever in our thoughts, being so precise, so solemn, so earnest. He foretold His first coming, yet He took His Church by surprise when He came; much more will He come suddenly the second time, and overtake men, now that He has not measured out the interval before it, as then He did, but left our watchfulness to the keeping of faith and love.

Let us then consider this most serious question, which concerns every one of us so nearly;—What it is to *watch* for Christ? He says, "*Watch* ye therefore, for ye know not when the Master of the house cometh; at even, or at midnight, or at the cock-crowing, or in the morning; lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all, *Watch*." [\[Note 2\]](#) And again, "If the goodman of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have *watched*, and not have suffered his house to be broken through." [Luke xii. 39.] A like warning is given elsewhere both by our Lord and by His Apostles. For instance; we have the parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were wise and five foolish; on whom the bridegroom, after tarrying came suddenly, and five were found without oil. On which our Lord says, "*Watch* therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh." [Matt. xxv. 13.] Again He says, "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts {321} be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares; for as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. *Watch* ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." [Luke xxi. 36.] In like manner He upbraided Peter thus: "Simon, sleepest thou? couldest not thou *watch* one hour?" [Mark xiv. 37.]

43 In like manner St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. "Now it is high time to awake out of
44 sleep ... The night is far spent, the day is at hand." [Rom. xiii. 11, 12.] Again, "*Watch* ye,
45 stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." [1 Cor. xvi. 13.] "Be strong in the
46 Lord, and in the power of His might; put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be
47 able to stand against the wiles of the devil; ... that ye may be able to withstand in the
48 evil day, and having done all to stand." [Eph. vi. 10-13.] "Let us not sleep as do others,
49 but let us *watch* and be sober." [1 Thess. v. 6.] In like manner St. Peter, "The end of all
50 things is at hand; be ye therefore sober, and *watch* unto prayer." "Be sober, be *vigilant*,
51 because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he
52 may devour." [Note 3] And St. John, "Behold I come as a thief; blessed is he
53 that *watcheth* and keepeth his garments." [Rev. xvi. 15.]

54 Now I consider this word *watching*, first used by our Lord, then by the favoured Disciple,
55 then by the two great Apostles, Peter and Paul, is a remarkable word, remarkable
56 because the idea is not so obvious as might {322} appear at first sight, and next
57 because they all inculcate it. We are not simply to believe, but to watch; not simply to
58 love, but to watch; not simply to obey, but to watch; to watch for what? for that great
59 event, Christ's coming. Whether then we consider what is the obvious meaning of the
60 word, or the Object towards which it directs us, we seem to see a special duty enjoined
61 on us, such as does not naturally come into our minds. Most of us have a general idea
62 what is meant by believing, fearing, loving, and obeying; but perhaps we do not
63 contemplate or apprehend what is meant by watching.

64 And I conceive it is one of the main points, which, in a practical way, will be found to
65 separate the true and perfect servants of God from the multitude called Christians; from
66 those who are, I do not say false and reprobate, but who are such that we cannot speak
67 much about them, nor can form any notion what will become of them. And in saying this,
68 do not understand me as saying, which I do not, that we can tell for certain who are the
69 perfect, and who the double-minded or incomplete Christians; or that those who
70 discourse and insist upon these subjects are necessarily on the right side of the line. I
71 am but speaking of two *characters*, the true and consistent character, and the
72 inconsistent; and these I say will be found in no slight degree discriminated and
73 distinguished by this one mark,—true Christians, whoever they are, watch, and
74 inconsistent Christians do not. Now what is watching?

75 I conceive it may be explained as follows:—Do you know the feeling in matters of this
76 life, of expecting a friend, expecting him to come, and he delays? Do you {323} know
77 what it is to be in unpleasant company, and to wish for the time to pass away, and the
78 hour strike when you may be at liberty? Do you know what it is to be in anxiety lest
79 something should happen which may happen or may not, or to be in suspense about
80 some important event, which makes your heart beat when you are reminded of it, and of
81 which you think the first thing in the morning? Do you know what it is to have a friend in
82 a distant country, to expect news of him, and to wonder from day to day what he is now
83 doing, and whether he is well? Do you know what it is so to live upon a person who is
84 present with you, that your eyes follow his, that you read his soul, that you see all its
85 changes in his countenance, that you anticipate his wishes, that you smile in his smile,

86 and are sad in his sadness, and are downcast when he is vexed, and rejoice in his
87 successes? To watch for Christ is a feeling such as all these; as far as feelings of this
88 world are fit to shadow out those of another.

89 He watches for Christ who has a sensitive, eager, apprehensive mind; who is awake,
90 alive, quick-sighted, zealous in seeking and honouring Him; who looks out for Him in all
91 that happens, and who would not be surprised, who would not be over-agitated or
92 overwhelmed, if he found that He was coming at once.

93 And he watches *with* Christ, who, while he looks on to the future, looks back on the
94 past, and does not so contemplate what his Saviour has purchased for him, as to forget
95 what He has suffered for him. He watches with Christ, who ever commemorates and
96 renews in his own person Christ's Cross and Agony, and gladly takes up {324} that
97 mantle of affliction which Christ wore here, and left behind Him when he ascended. And
98 hence in the Epistles, often as the inspired writers show their desire for His second
99 coming, as often do they show their memory of His first, and never lose sight of His
100 Crucifixion in His Resurrection. Thus if St. Paul reminds the Romans that they "wait for
101 the redemption of the body" at the Last Day, he also says, "If so be that we *suffer with*
102 *Him*, that we may be also glorified together." If he speaks to the Corinthians of "waiting
103 for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," he also speaks of "always bearing about in the
104 body the *dying* of the Lord Jesus, *that* the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in
105 our body." If to the Philippians of "the power of His resurrection," he adds at once "*and*
106 *the fellowship of His sufferings*, being made conformable unto His death." If he consoles
107 the Colossians with the hope "when Christ shall appear," of their "appearing with Him in
108 glory," he has already declared that he "*fills up that which remains of the afflictions of*
109 *Christ* in his flesh for His body's sake, which is the Church." [Rom. viii. 17-28. 1 Cor. i. 7.
110 2 Cor. iv. 10. Phil. iii. 10. Col. iii. 4; i. 24.] Thus the thought of what Christ is, must not
111 obliterate from the mind the thought of what He was; and faith is always sorrowing with
112 Him while it rejoices. And the same union of opposite thoughts is impressed on us in
113 Holy Communion, in which we see Christ's death and resurrection together, at one and
114 the same time; we commemorate the one, we rejoice in the other; we make an offering,
115 and we gain a blessing. {325}

116 This then is to watch; to be detached from what is present, and to live in what is unseen;
117 to live in the thought of Christ as He came once, and as He will come again; to desire
118 His second coming, from our affectionate and grateful remembrance of His first. And
119 this it is, in which we shall find that men in general are wanting. They are indeed without
120 faith and love also; but at least they profess to have these graces, nor is it easy to
121 convince them that they have not. For they consider they have faith, if they do but own
122 that the Bible came from God, or that they trust wholly in Christ for salvation; and they
123 consider they have love if they obey some of the most obvious of God's
124 commandments. Love and faith they think they have; but surely they do not even fancy
125 that they watch. What is meant by watching, and how it is a duty, they have no definite
126 idea; and thus it accidentally happens that watching is a suitable test of a Christian, in
127 that it is that particular property of faith and love, which, essential as it is, men of this

128 world do not even profess; that particular property, which is the life or energy of faith
129 and love, the way in which faith and love, if genuine, show themselves.

130 It is easy to exemplify what I mean, from the experience which we all have of life. Many
131 men indeed are open revilers of religion, or at least openly disobey its laws; but let us
132 consider those who are of a more sober and conscientious cast of mind. They have a
133 number of good qualities, and are in a certain sense and up to a certain point religious;
134 but they do not watch. Their notion of religion is briefly this: loving God indeed, but
135 loving this world too; not only doing their {326} *duty*, but finding their chief and
136 highest *good*, in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call them, resting in it,
137 taking it as their portion. They serve God, and they seek Him; but they look on the
138 present world as if it were the eternal, not a mere temporary, scene of their duties and
139 privileges, and never contemplate the prospect of being separated from it. It is not that
140 they forget God, or do not live by principle, or forget that the goods of this world are His
141 gift; but they love them for their own sake more than for the sake of the Giver, and
142 reckon on their remaining, as if they had that permanence which their duties and
143 religious privileges have. They do not understand that they are called to be strangers
144 and pilgrims upon the earth, and that their worldly lot and worldly goods are a sort of
145 accident of their existence, and that they really have no property, though human law
146 guarantees property to them. Accordingly, they set their heart upon their goods, be they
147 great or little, not without a sense of religion the while, but still idolatrously. *This* is their
148 fault,—an identifying God with this world, and therefore an idolatry towards this world;
149 and so they are rid of the trouble of looking out for their God, for they think they have
150 found Him in the goods of this world. While, then, they are really praiseworthy in many
151 parts of their conduct, benevolent, charitable, kind, neighbourly, and useful in their
152 generation, nay, constant perhaps in the ordinary religious duties which custom has
153 established, and while they display much right and amiable feeling, and much
154 correctness in opinion, and are even in the way to improve in character and conduct as
155 time goes {327} on, correct much that is amiss, gain greater command over themselves,
156 mature in judgment, and are much looked up to in consequence; yet still it is plain that
157 they love this world, would be loth to leave it, and wish to have more of its good things.
158 They like wealth, and distinction, and credit, and influence. They may improve in
159 conduct, but not in aims; they advance, but they do not mount; they are moving on a low
160 level, and were they to move on for centuries, would never rise above the atmosphere
161 of this world. "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to
162 see what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd." [Hab. ii. 1.]
163 This is the temper of mind which they have not; and when we reflect how rarely
164 it *is* found among professing Christians, we shall see why our Lord is so urgent in
165 enforcing it;—as if He said, "I am not warning you, My followers, against open apostasy;
166 that will not be; but I foresee that very few will keep awake and watch while I am away.
167 Blessed are the servants who do so; few will open to me *immediately*, when I knock.
168 They will have something to do first; they will have to get ready. They will have to
169 recover from the surprise and confusion which overtake them on the first news of My
170 coming, and will need time to collect themselves, and summon about them their better
171 thoughts and affections. They feel themselves very well off as they are; and wish to

172 serve God as they are. They are satisfied to remain on earth; they do not wish to move;
173 they do not wish to change."

174 Without denying, then, to these persons the praise of {328} many religious habits and
175 practices, I would say that they want the tender and sensitive heart which hangs on the
176 thought of Christ, and lives in His love. The breath of the world has a peculiar power in
177 what may be called rusting the soul. The mirror within them, instead of reflecting back
178 the Son of God their Saviour, has become dim and discoloured; and hence, though (to
179 use a common expression) they have a good deal of good *in* them, it is only *in* them, it
180 is not through them, around them, and upon them. An evil crust is *on* them: they think
181 with the world; they are full of the world's notions and modes of speaking; they appeal to
182 the world, and have a sort of reverence for what the world will say. There is a want of
183 naturalness, simplicity, and childlike teachableness in them. It is difficult to touch them,
184 or (what may be called) get at them, and to persuade them to a straight-forward course
185 in religion. They start off when you least expect it: they have reservations, make
186 distinctions, take exceptions, indulge in refinements, in questions where there are really
187 but two sides, a right and a wrong. Their religious feelings do not flow forth easily, at
188 times when they ought to flow; either they are diffident, and can say nothing, or else
189 they are affected and strained in their mode of conversing. And as a rust preys upon
190 metal and eats into it, so does this worldly spirit penetrate more and more deeply into
191 the soul which once admits it. And this is one great end, as it would appear, of
192 afflictions, viz., to rub away and clear off these outward defilements, and to keep the
193 soul in a measure of its baptismal purity and brightness.

194 Now, it cannot surely be doubted that multitudes in {329} the Church are such as I have
195 been describing, and that they would not, could not, at once welcome our Lord on His
196 coming. We cannot, indeed, apply what has been said to this or that individual; but on
197 the whole, viewing the multitude, one cannot be mistaken. There may be exceptions;
198 but after all conceivable deductions, a large body must remain thus double-minded, thus
199 attempting to unite things incompatible. This we might be sure of, though Christ had
200 said nothing on the subject; but it is a most affecting and solemn thought, that He has
201 actually called our attention to this very danger, the danger of a worldly religiousness,
202 for so it may be called, though it *is* religiousness; this mixture of religion and unbelief,
203 which serves God indeed, but loves the fashions, the distinctions, the pleasures, the
204 comforts of this life,—which feels a satisfaction in being prosperous in circumstances,
205 likes poms and vanities, is particular about food, raiment, house, furniture, and
206 domestic matters, courts great people, and aims at having a position in society. He
207 warns His disciples of the danger of having their minds drawn off from the thought of
208 Him, by whatever cause; He warns them against *all* excitements, *all* allurements of this
209 world; He solemnly warns them that the world will not be prepared for His coming, and
210 tenderly intreats of them not to take their portion with the world. He warns them by the
211 instance of the rich man whose soul was required, of the servant who ate and drank,
212 and of the foolish virgins. When He comes, they will one and all want time; their head
213 will be confused, their eyes will swim, their tongue falter, their limbs totter, as men who
214 are suddenly {330} awakened. They will not all at once collect their senses and
215 faculties. O fearful thought! the bridal train is sweeping by,—Angels are there,—the just

216 made perfect are there,—little children, and holy teachers, and white-robed saints, and
217 martyrs washed in blood; the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made
218 herself ready. She has already attired herself: while we have been sleeping, she has
219 been robing; she has been adding jewel to jewel, and grace to grace; she has been
220 gathering in her chosen ones, one by one, and has been exercising them in holiness,
221 and purifying them for her Lord; and now her marriage hour is come. The holy
222 Jerusalem is descending, and a loud voice proclaims, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh;
223 go ye out to meet Him!" but we, alas! are but dazzled with the blaze of light, and neither
224 welcome the sound, nor obey it,—and all for what? what shall we have gained then?
225 what will this world have then done for us? wretched, deceiving world! which will then be
226 burned up, unable not only to profit us, but to save itself. Miserable hour, indeed, will
227 that be, when the full consciousness breaks on us of what we will not believe now, viz.,
228 that we *are* at present serving the world. We trifle with our conscience now; we deceive
229 our better judgment; we repel the hints of those who tell us that we are joining ourselves
230 to this perishing world. We *will* taste a little of its pleasures, and follow its ways, and
231 think it no harm, so that we do not altogether neglect religion. I mean, we allow
232 ourselves to covet what we have not, to boast in what we have, to look down on those
233 who have less; or we allow ourselves to profess what we do not try to practise, to argue
234 {331} for the sake of victory, and to debate when we should be obeying; and we pride
235 ourselves on our reasoning powers, and think ourselves enlightened, and despise those
236 who had less to say for themselves, and set forth and defend our own theories; or we
237 are over-anxious, fretful, and care-worn about worldly matters, spiteful, envious, jealous,
238 discontented, and evil-natured: in one or other way we take our portion with this world,
239 and we will not believe that we do. We obstinately refuse to believe it; we know we are
240 not altogether irreligious, and we persuade ourselves that we are religious. We learn to
241 think it is possible to be too religious; we have taught ourselves that there is nothing
242 high or deep in religion, no great exercise of our affections, no great food for our
243 thoughts, no great work for our exertions. We go on in a self-satisfied or a self-conceited
244 way, not looking out of ourselves, not standing like soldiers on the watch in the dark
245 night; but we kindle our own fire, and delight ourselves in the sparks of it. This is our
246 state, or something like this, and the Day will declare it; the Day is at hand, and the Day
247 will search our hearts, and bring it home even to ourselves, that we have been cheating
248 ourselves with words, and have not served Christ, as the Redeemer of the soul claims,
249 but with a meagre, partial, worldly service, and without really contemplating Him who is
250 above and apart from this world.

251 Year passes after year silently; Christ's coming is ever nearer than it was. O that, as He
252 comes nearer earth, we may approach nearer heaven! O, my brethren, pray Him to give
253 you the heart to seek Him in sincerity. {332} Pray Him to make you in earnest. You have
254 one work only, to bear your cross after Him. Resolve in His strength to do so. Resolve
255 to be no longer beguiled by "shadows of religion," by words, or by disputings, or by
256 notions, or by high professions, or by excuses, or by the world's promises or threats.
257 Pray Him to give you what Scripture calls "an honest and good heart," or "a perfect
258 heart," and, without waiting, begin at once to obey Him with the best heart you have.
259 Any obedience is better than none,—any profession which is disjoined from obedience,
260 is a mere pretence and deceit. Any religion which does not bring you nearer to God is of

261 the world. You have to seek His face; obedience is the only way of seeking Him. All
262 your duties are obediences. If you are to believe the truths He has revealed, to regulate
263 yourselves by His precepts, to be frequent in His ordinances, to adhere to His Church
264 and people, why is it, except because *He* has bid you? and to do what He bids is to
265 obey Him, and to obey Him is to approach Him. Every act of obedience is an
266 approach,—an approach to Him who is not far off, though He seems so, but close
267 behind this visible screen of things which hides Him from us. He is behind this material
268 framework; earth and sky are but a veil going between Him and us; the day will come
269 when He will rend that veil, and show Himself to us. And then, according as we have
270 waited for Him, will He recompense us. If we have forgotten Him, He will not know us;
271 but "blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching ...
272 He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve
273 {333} them. And if He shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and
274 find them so, blessed are those servants," [Luke xii. 37, 38.] May this be the portion of
275 every one of us! It is hard to attain it; but it is woeful to fail. Life is short; death is certain;
276 and the world to come is everlasting.

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