

The Return of the King

We are continuing our study of *God's Big Picture*, finishing up that last part of the 'Proclaimed Kingdom.' This is the age of the 'already but not yet'—the age between the present kingdom (Christ's first coming) and the perfected kingdom (Christ's second coming). This is the age of gospel proclamation, the time when Jesus' disciples have been given the Spirit to equip them to take the gospel of the kingdom to all people throughout the whole world, to fallen people who live in a fallen world—the world which bears the marks of sin and God's judgment against it. It's the last age of opportunity to tell forth the 'good news of Christ,' and for all Christians to be prepared and ready for the arrival of the King, which could come at any time!

So, that could be today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year—a thousand years from now. The question for us are: What does that mean for our lives at this moment? How does the reality of Christ's return affect the way we think and the way we feel right now and the way we live right now?

So, this morning we are going to consider Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew 24 and 25, which help us answer those questions.

Matthew 24:1-35 (read)

We are not going to spend much time on these very familiar and controversial verses, going over all the specific details and getting bogged down by them. Instead, we want to see Jesus' main message to his disciples then and now, from which come some exhortations. We will spend the bulk of our time on the five sobering stories Jesus used to magnify his message.

In these first 35 verses, we have a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, who are being reminded that the promises of the kingdom will not be completely fulfilled until his second coming. Upon being told of the temple's destruction, the disciples asked him a twofold question, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (v. 3). He answered by giving them two prophecies. One was the destruction of the temple; the other was his glorious return.

Jesus was telling them in these verses what to expect and be prepared for after his ascension until his return. When they encountered any of these signs, they were not to be surprised or alarmed by them, but they were to persevere in their faith in the power of Christ with an eye on his return.

From this passage, three exhortations emerge.

1. Trust in Christ's Authoritative Word.

Jesus spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem, and it happened in 70A.D. He told of his return, which will happen when “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (vv.30-31).

The temple passed away; and the world will pass away. His return will be a time of judgment when “all the tribes of the earth will mourn” (v.30). Jesus' disciples then and now are called to trust in Christ's authoritative word: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (v.35).

Followers of Christ are to remember that the things of this world are passing away—even the best, most stable things in this world are passing. Things that you and I marvel at, things that you and I treasure, things that you and I build our lives on—all of it is passing away. That is to say, don't build your life on the things of this world. Instead build your life on things that are permanent and have everlasting eternal value!

So if he should return tonight, what will be revealed of you in this matter?

2. Know what to expect and be prepared for it; you will need to be equipped “to walk by faith and not by sight.”

- Wars, rumors of wars, nation against nation, famines and earthquakes, trials, tribulations, persecution and death will occur until the end (vv. 6-9).
- Deception will arise from those who attempt to undermine gospel truths, preaching and teaching another gospel, another Jesus, one that doesn't square with Scripture (vv. 4-5, 23-25).
- Many will fall away—those who once professed faith and stood shoulder to shoulder with the saints, whose love for Christ had grown cold, who will return to the dark side. (vv. 10-13) “Expect it,” said Jesus, “because they were not of my sheep. They never knew my voice” (Jn. 10).

3. Know from the lesson of the fig tree our need to be in a constant state of alert, to have the eyes of our hearts fixed and excited for our King to return, for he is “near, at the very gates”—one day nearer than yesterday (vv. 32-35).

Let's now turn our attention to the rest of today's passage. From this point on, Jesus is telling story after story to help us understand how we should live in the light of his coming. It is sobering!

READ verses 36-42

From verses 36-42, Jesus is going into more detail about his return. He is telling us that:

His delay will be *long*.

Jesus remarkably comments in verse 36 about how even he doesn't know the day and hour when this will happen, that nobody knows except the Father in heaven. Here, we see an example of Christ in his humanity, restraining his deity. By becoming a man, he humbly accepted limitations upon his omniscience in this circumstance. This is a reminder that no man anywhere on earth—no matter what he claims—knows when Jesus is going to return.

But his return will be delayed. This is said in the next chapter, verse 5, "As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept." Again in verse 19, "Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them." Referring to chapter 24: 6-10, Jesus says that all those things that will come "are but birth pains." He goes on to say in verse 14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

These verses all speak of his delay, which has been particularly long to all of us. But we must remember Peter's words that "...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). His delay will be long.

His return will be *sudden*.

As we see in verses 36-42, Jesus talks about the days of Noah when the people were eating, drinking, and marrying. Everything was normal, routine, when suddenly, a flood came and swept them away.

Jesus is telling his disciples that that's how it's going to be when he returns. People will be going about their daily lives, when all of a sudden, to their shock, Christ will return. One day, everything will be immediately turned upside down! Jesus will have returned as Judge of our lives and this world. This is another exhortation to not put your hope in your job, your house, your investments, your plans—into the things of this world but to invest into the things that will last.

When Jesus returns, his judgment will be *irreversible*.

Every single story continues to make that point—about servants who are not ready for their master’s return, who are cast into darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth; about bridesmaids, who are locked out of a marriage feast and the door is shut to them—never, never to open again. These stories tell of people being cast into everlasting punishment. There is absolutely no hint here or anywhere else in Scripture that teaches there will be a second chance on the day that Jesus comes back.

On that day, our hearts will be exposed. The motives of all our actions will be revealed. Our true nature will be brought to light. Nothing on that day will be hidden. Everything will be open and laid bare before the eyes of whom we are now to give an account (Heb. 4:13). And for some, like those in our stories, will be shocked and surprised at their sentence.

This brings us back to Jesus’ words from his most famous sermon. At the end of it he said, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matt. 7:22-23)

Many people on that day will be shocked. Though they thought they were on the narrow road that leads to heaven, they were, instead, on the broad way that leads to hell! That is a sobering truth! Many, many people who think they are safe, in reality don’t know Jesus in a saving way. In contemporary Christianity, this could very well be pandemic! Scores of people who have made a decision, prayed a prayer, signed a card, been baptized, and are active in their churches do not truly know Christ. Jesus is saying here, “Don’t be presumptuous about your spiritual well-being! Your sentence may be surprising!”

We will each stand *alone*.

Two men in the field. One man will be taken, one left. Two women grinding in the mill, one will be taken, one left. It doesn’t matter who you are on that day. Homes and nations will be divided into two groups. It doesn’t matter where you grew up, what kind of parents you had, or what you accomplished in life. On that day, you and I will stand alone.

So in light of Jesus’ delay being long, that his return will be sudden, that his final judgment will be irreversible, we will each stand before the judgment seat of Christ alone. We need to remember that and be prepared.

That is Jesus' whole point in Matthew 24:36 – 25:46. It's a question that we need to ask ourselves: AM I PREPARED?

Jesus now tells five sobering stories.

Then and now, all of them have the same point: WE MUST BE PREPARED because our lives are at stake for eternity. Each story has eternal significance, and each poses a question that forces us to honestly and humbly ask ourselves, "Am I prepared for that day, because it will come suddenly; and if I'm not, it will be too late!"

READ verses 42-44

Are we keeping watch for Christ? It's an interesting illustration that Jesus is calling himself a burglar in the night. But Scripture clearly uses this same terminology.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:2 – "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come as a *thief* in the night."
- 2 Peter 3:10 – "But the day of the Lord will come like a *thief*..."
- Revelation 3:3 – "Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a *thief*, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."
- Revelation 16:15 – "Behold, I will come like a *thief*."

The point is clear. If you know a thief is coming to your house, if he were to leave you a voice mail saying, "I will be there tonight," you would most certainly stay awake. You would most certainly keep watch. But how are you and I to keep watch for Christ on a daily basis?

An illustration that is helpful is having a baby, naturally or adopted. Once news of its arrival date is known, the couple still goes about their daily routines. But all the while, they are forward gazing to what is to come for them, a bundle of blessings! Inexpressible joy! They can't wait to hold this little person and love on him or her. As the days draw nearer to that time, their excitement of what is anticipated grows. So, it should be as it pertains to Christ's return for us.

So, the question is, do you have that same longing for Christ's coming? Is his coming on your mind? On your heart? Not in such a way that you stop everything you are doing, but in a way that affects everything you are doing. You think about him and not because you are forced to. You think about him because you love him and long for him to come. Is that true of you? If not, it says something about your heart, about your perspective on the things of this world, and where your priorities and passions lie.

READ verses 45-51

Are you faithfully following Christ? One servant is faithfully serving his master while he is away; the other does not and, therefore, dishonors him, and is surprised by his master's unexpected return.

I want to share with you some resolutions that deal with time management made by the Puritan theologian and writer Jonathan Edwards. He wrote 70 resolutions shortly after becoming a Christian, resolutions that he would go over once a week, and at the end of each year do a spiritual assessment to see how he could improve them. Even though Edwards wrote these words as a teenager, in the full bloom of life, he wanted to be prepared to meet his Lord and have his Lord's approval.

Focusing on the end of life—of Christ's return—had the effect of helping Edwards prioritize what was most important. It helped him choose the highest ends in life. For him, not all choices were between good and evil. Some of the most difficult were between good, better, and best—which, for him, was living for the glory of God. Here are a few:

7. Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

19. Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour, before I should hear the last trump.

These two resolutions were Edward's desire to be vigilant in mortifying his sin until his dying hours.

36. Resolved, to inquire every night, as I am going to bed, wherein I have denied myself: also at the end of every week, month and year.

41. Resolved, to ask myself at the end of every day, week, month, and year, wherein I could possibly in any respect have done better.

50. Resolved, I will act so as I think I shall judge would have been best, and most prudent, when I come into the future world.

55. Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell's torments.

With his resolutions, Edwards purposed that he would never do anything that would bring him regret and shame if Christ should return at that moment. Knowing that Christ could burst into the room at any moment restrained him from certain thoughts, attitudes, actions, and activities. It was his desire that when the last trumpet should sound, he would

not be found in sin but in godly living. He realized the reality of heaven and hell, and it changed the way he lived.

Would that same realization change the way you live now? If you knew that Jesus was coming back tonight, would that change the way you live today? And this text is saying: **LIVE THAT WAY TODAY!!!** Will you be found walking in obedience that day—or wandering in disobedience? If he were to come today, would he find you loving your neighbor or ignoring your neighbor? Would he find you passionately devoted to your spouse, or impartial and negligent of your spouse? Would you be found hating your sin or holding onto it? What are you doing in your week that wouldn't make sense if it were the last hour of your life?

And feel the horror of what Jesus said will happen to the one who is found to be unfaithful. The master “will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” without end (v. 51) The stakes are high in these questions.

READ Matthew 25:1-13

Are you really trusting in Christ? Here we have ten bridesmaids in a wedding. We don't have all the details behind this wedding ritual, but clearly there was a wedding party waiting for the bridegroom to come so that they could all enter the wedding feast. And the one and only thing that separates the bridesmaids from each other is that five of them were prepared with the oil in their lamps and the other five were unprepared. This group of unprepared bridesmaids was completely denied entrance when the bridegroom arrived—left out of the wedding feast altogether, and told by the bridegroom, “I do not know you” (v.12).

This story is making the same point as in the other four, but with an emphasis on being prepared so as to endure to the end. Jesus is here saying that there are some who have enough oil to burn for a bit, but not enough oil to persevere through the night until the groom comes.

We read this same truth in Jesus' parable of the sower in Matthew 13, when some seeds “fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away” (v. 5-6). These bridesmaids clearly were not prepared for the long wait. They were not prepared to persevere to the end when the groom returned. They had no ‘roots’ to sustain them!

This is to say that the kingdom of heaven is not open to those who simply respond to an invitation or simply make a profession or express some affection. Each of these bridesmaids would have said that they were part of the bridal party. Their cry in verse 11 is eerily similar to what we read in Matthew 7, “Lord, Lord, open to us.” This was a joyful occasion that was going to take place, and they wanted to be there. But they didn’t persevere in order to be a part of it.

The Kingdom of God is only for those who endure to salvation. That’s the whole point of these chapters. Referring again to Matthew 24:9-13, Jesus was saying that many who look like Christians aren’t and, therefore, over time they fall away and actually become enemies of those who remain in the faith. “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v.13).

This is true of every generation. There are people today who say they are Christians, believing themselves to be so at some time in their past they said a prayer, walked an aisle, were baptized, or got involved in their church. They believed that they had put their trust in Jesus, but today their hearts are far from God and their trust is in themselves.

That’s the point of the question. Are you trusting Christ today? Even though there are challenges, frustrations, and trials taking place in your life and testing your faith, are you trusting Christ today in your heart and in your life—not a long time ago in the past, but now? Does your life look different since you became a Christian? Not perfect but better? There are many—some of those who regularly attend our church, sing the songs in worship, and who minister in the name of Jesus, who hold to a form of piety while denying its power, who travel on unprepared, who will *not* share in the blessings of Christ’s return.

Make sure you are trusting in Christ alone, by faith alone, by grace alone!

Read 25:14-30

Are you serving Christ with what he has given you? This story is unique in that it goes beyond watching and waiting to working until Jesus comes back. The whole story is about servants who have been entrusted with much. Just so that you feel the weight of this story, a talent is believed to be worth about \$300,000. So, we are not talking about pennies here. The man had given them much.

The overall parallel here is clear. Jesus is our master, and he has given much to us. He is our master, and we are his stewards, who have been given much from his hand and are responsible for what we do with it.

So, two servants take what has been entrusted to them and work diligently with it. They are faithful to their master in the way they maximize his resources. Now the key to understanding this story is not to view this story as a master-servant relationship that is cold, hard, and the only thing that matters is the bottom line. Instead, you have got to see the joy and excitement—the heart between the first two servants and their relationship to their master. You can almost sense their excitement in wanting to show their master what they have done with the money they were entrusted with while he was away. It was their joy to give back more than they had initially received. Both were commended and heard, “Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your master” (vv.21,23).

See the joy that exists between servant and master. It begs the question, “Will you be commended for your love for Christ?” This love for Christ is what ties these stories together. Our love for Christ is what keeps us watchful, faithful, obedient, trusting in him, and persevering to the end. Here, in this story it is love for Christ that makes serving him with all that he has given to us a joy, a love that shows itself by maximizing his gifts for his pleasure and glory.

So, will you be commended for your love or condemned for your laziness? The last servant was not commended but condemned for what he had failed to do. He did nothing with what the master had entrusted to him. And don’t miss the reason behind it: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (v. 24-25).

Here, you see this servant demonstrating his lack of love, his lack of joy in his master, blaming and accusing him of being “a hard man.” The master’s response was condemnation. Their relationship was severed.

This is to say that it is wrong for any of Christ’s servants to do nothing and just hang in there to the end. For those who are the servants of the Lord, it is their duty, privilege, and joy to improve the gifts given to them by the Master. Failure to do so, proves that they can’t be valued as disciples at all.

So, what are you doing, believer, with what Christ has entrusted to you? This is not to say that we need to go out and earn our keep before Jesus gets back. That’s not the point. It is this: Do you love Christ in such a way that you serve Christ with all that he has given you? Will you be commended for your love or condemned for your laziness?

Read 25:31-46

Are you serving the Christians that God has put around you? This story is open to all kinds of confusion. Many people read this passage and think that something good done for anyone is something that is done for Jesus. However, that kind of thinking misses the point of the passage. The key is in verse 40, where Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the one of the least of these my *brothers*, you did it to me.” The whole point is that Jesus is identifying himself with his followers, with those who have trusted in him.

There are other places in Scripture where Jesus specifically identifies himself with his people, with Christians. In Acts 9, Paul, who has been breathing threats and murder against the disciples, encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. And Jesus asked him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (v. 4). That is Jesus saying, “When you go around persecuting Christians, you are persecuting me. When you are messing with them, you are messing with me.” It means that when we are serving other Christians, we are serving Jesus. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t help and serve others who are not Christians; we are encouraged to do so. That is just not the specific point of this passage.

Again, this is not exhorting us to serve others as a means of getting to heaven. These saints are welcomed into heaven, and they are surprised by what Jesus says. They ask, “When did we do all these things for you?” Clearly, they were going about feeding the hungry, providing drink for the thirsty, opening themselves up to hospitality, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison. They were shocked that those things had anything to do with getting into heaven.

They had served their fellow believers because their hearts had been changed, and they had become obedient to what Jesus said back in John 15:12, “...love one another as I have loved you!” John picks this up and expands Jesus’ command in his first letter.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth (1 Jn. 3:16-18).

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 Jn. 4:19-21).

This is huge for us because we have an abundance of things and are surrounded by many of our Christian brothers in need. We need to open our hearts and hands and sacrificially give to our fellow believers. By doing so, we are loving and honoring our

Jesus! It is evidence of a heart changed by Christ. A life that has been graced will be consumed with helping the brothers and sisters that surround them.

Now, the rest of the story makes explicit what is obvious in all these stories: there is only one of two destinations for every person born. One is heaven; one is hell. One group will hear from King Jesus, “Come, you, who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v.34). The other group will hear different condemning words from King Jesus, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal life prepared for the devil and his angels.”

One group will enter into unhindered enjoyment of the Father’s love, into the kingdom of God where finally God’s people will be in God’s place and under his rule and blessing—a kingdom of unlimited joy and delight and everlasting satisfaction in God. Why would we not long for this day, faithfully keep watch for Christ, trust Christ, serve Christ, and other Christians around us as we anticipate this day?

A picture that shows the polar opposite for those destined for hell is given in verses 41 and following. Here there is no enjoyment of the Father’s love, but total separation from him in a place prepared for the devil and his demons. They will suffer there with them in expressible and unquenchable torment without end.

In speaking for all the teachers in our class, I can say that we love you all and miss being with you. We are praying for each of you, asking the Lord for his protection, peace, and comfort to be yours, until we can safely meet again.

Attached is a song by a college choir that I hope you all will enjoy!