

Final Week: Matthew 24-25

At the end of the previous lecture, I noted that hypocrisy always begins with self-deception, but the longer it continues the person will sincerely believe he is not a hypocrite. The Pharisees were this second type. Jesus' words no longer convicted them, but only angered them. Yet He knew He had to continue warning them.

Let me tell you a parable by way of illustration. Once upon a time, a woman woke up with a severe headache on the right side of her head. After it persisted a number of days, she finally went to her doctor. Her doctor put her through a variety of tests, got the results, consulted with a specialist, and confirmed that the woman had a brain tumor. Being a tender and kind man, he did not want to tell her the real results, so he told her the pain would be gone in six months. This was a true statement in one respect—she would die in six months. Often, people think that kindness and tenderness is an unwillingness to offend anyone. But of course this is actually tenderness without kindness, because it is saying that all is fine when it is not.

It is important to warn people about sin. When someone says, "God loves you," there is more that may need to be said. Maybe God is also intent upon judging you. Jesus is too merciful *not* to tell the truth. Those of you who are counselors know that there is such a thing as foolish kindness. Such "kindness" does not get to the root of the matter, but only addresses what is on the surface.

With that, we turn to Jesus' last words to His disciples in a sustained discourse. It is described in both Matthew 24-25 and John 13-17; I will deal primarily with Matthew. In Matthew 24-25, Jesus gives His fifth great discourse, and speaks about last things. There are several issues we need to consider. First, the theme is clear: Jesus is teaching His disciples about the fall of Jerusalem and the last things. The passage is not just about the eternal future, but also the near future in the life of His disciples. Second, "Is this passage truly prophetic?" The critics commonly say that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written after A.D. 70. Therefore, these "prophecies" were written after the event, implying that the Gospels are unreliable, and that the authors simply put words in Jesus' mouth. However, these words could not be written after the real event, because the details in Matthew 24 do not come from contemporary accounts of the fall of Jerusalem, but from Old Testament prophecies.

If you read Josephus' account of the fall of Jerusalem, you find an emphasis on the murderous in-fighting among the Jews and their slaughtering of each other in great numbers. Josephus notes that the Jews took refuge within the temple walls, which were dozens of feet high and many feet thick, but because of the in-fighting, the temple was filled with blood, not of sacrificial animals but of humans. The Romans burned the temple gates and the whole city and murdered Jews. But none of these particular details, that were so emphasized by those who were present, were stressed by Jesus. He does not even mention Jewish in-fighting. Those details prove that Jesus' prophecy was not tailored after the event to fit contemporary recollections of it. It was not written in A.D. 80, but was written beforehand using the language Jesus had available from the Old Testament, language about God's wrath on wicked cities.

For example, Jesus drew on Isaiah 19 and Ezekiel 4 and 28 for the idea that camps would be built, the sea would be encircled, siege ramps would be erected (which actually did happen in the Roman conquest, although this is not the main thing the contemporary accounts describe). The crushing of the city and the destroying of the walls (which, again, is not emphasized by Josephus) is actually taken from Amos 9 and Isaiah 5 and 64. The idea that the city would become a heap of stones, that not one stone

would rest upon the other, is from Isaiah 25, Jeremiah 26, and various other references. The leveling of the city and slaying of its children is described in Isaiah 26 and is perhaps alluded to in one of the psalms. Jesus' language is based on the lamentations and words of judgment in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and others. The Gospels never say that it is the Romans who will come—if the prophecy had been given after the event, it probably would have mentioned the Romans, rather than simply “enemies.” Jesus' words are not tailored very precisely to what actually happened.

The flight of the Christians is another consideration. Jesus says in Matthew 24:15-16 that when they see the abomination that causes desolation, they should flee to the mountains of Judea. But the Christians did not do what Jesus said; they fled to a city called Pella. If the Gospels had been written after this, they would have had Jesus saying that they should flee to Pella.

I believe the Gospels were all written before the year A.D. 70, and Jesus' words were truly prophecies. When Jesus speaks of the “abomination of desolation” (Matthew 24:15), Matthew adds in parentheses “Let the reader understand,” that is, this is coming soon; when this happens, flee. It is a prophecy given to warn the church, but also to preserve the church from receiving the judgment that was due to fall upon Israel. By A.D. 70 the church is slowly spreading but many Christians were still living in Jerusalem. This was warning them to get out, to flee, because judgment was coming. Remember that Jesus promised He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. His prophetic warning is one of the ways He would protect His church and keep it from being wiped out.

There is a lot of controversy surrounding the dating of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Generally, critics and liberals tend to say that the Gospels were written quite a long time after the events. They would date John around A.D. 95, Mark at 68 or 72, Matthew and Luke at 80 or 85. This implies that it was not Matthew who wrote the Gospel of Matthew, but people who did not really know or see what was happening. Thus memories would fade and there would be a lot of creativity in writing the Gospels, in the negative sense. But there is evidence that the synoptic Gospels were all written within a generation of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Briefly, by A.D. 150 – 200, early church leaders said that Matthew wrote first. If you look carefully, you will notice apparent allusions to the Gospel of Luke in 2 Corinthians, which was written in late 50's. 2 Corinthians 8:18 contains the phrase, “The brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the Gospel.” I think that means praise to Luke. If Matthew was written before Luke, then Matthew must have been written in the 50's or 40's. A helpful book on this whole topic is John Wenham's *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*.

I would now like to address the disciples' questions. As they leave the temple district, the disciples asked Jesus two questions. They are leaving the city, looking back upon it, and we can imagine how the gilded marble and polished stone of the temple was glistening in the sunset. The disciples, who had not been to Jerusalem often and had not become accustomed to its beauty, said simply, “Look at the buildings, Jesus.” Mark elaborates on their words: “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (Mark 13:1). Jesus responds in Matthew 24:2, “You see them? I tell you the truth, that not one stone will be left on another. Every stone will be thrown down.” The disciples asked Him privately to tell them when it would happen—the sign of His coming and of the end of the age.

This raises a crucial interpretive question. How many questions do the disciples ask? In your English translation, it reads as three questions: “When will it happen?” “What will be the sign of Your coming?” and “What will be the sign of the end of the age?” But in Greek, there are two questions: “When is it

going to happen?” and, “When is the sign of the coming to an end of the age?” The disciples thought they were asking one question. They thought the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus’ coming, and the end of the age were all one thing. If there are two questions, how many answers do you think Jesus gives? Probably two, but the trick is to comprehend when the answers start and when the answers stop. Doing so is vital if we want to understand His answers regarding the end of time.

There are many mistakes about this passage. I keep in my file drawer a booklet called “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Take Place in 1988.” It sold tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of copies. When the rapture did not take place in 1988, the author wrote another pamphlet, listing 89 reasons the rapture would happen in 1989. People are always predicting the end of the world and eventually someone is going to be right but no one knows. But the crucial question is, how do we divide what Jesus says in His answers?

I believe that the first question is answered in Matthew 24:4-35, and the second answer begins in Matthew 24:36. One reason I say question one—“When will these things be?”—is answered until verse 35, is what Jesus says the fall of Jerusalem will take place in *this* generation, which means 40 years, and 37-38 years later, Jerusalem fell. He said it would happen in that generation and it did. Then in Matthew 24:36, Jesus starts talking about the second question, about His coming and the end of the age. You can tell He changes to a new topic when He says, “No one knows about *that* day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, not the Son of Man, only the Father.” Jesus says it is going to be the way it was in the days of Noah. What was it like in the days of Noah? Noah kept saying that it was going to rain but the people ignored him and went about their business. One hundred and twenty years passed and then it rained. They were astonished when it did happen. Similarly, people will not know when the last day is coming.

The other reason we know Jesus transitions to a new topic in verse 36 is that His reference to “that day” it is a phrase used a number of times in the Bible for the day of judgment, such Matthew 7:22, Luke 10:22, and 2 Timothy 4:8, among others. “That day” is a technical term that everyone in Jesus’ day understood. An equivalent in our culture is the phrase “Super Bowl.” Everyone knows the Super Bowl is not an enormous mixing bowl, but a football game that takes place every January. Likewise, everybody knew that when Jesus said “that day” He was talking about the day of judgment.

If you follow what I am saying, you are probably going to have to see a few verses in a new way. Many parts of Matthew 24:4-36 are commonly read as prophecies of the end of time, rather than of the fall of Jerusalem. This is not completely wrong, because the fall of Jerusalem foreshadows the day of judgment, just as the fall of Babylon did. But Jesus’ prophecies primarily refer to the end of Jerusalem. For the nation of Israel, the fall of Jerusalem was almost as good as their last day. It was foreshadowing, a dress rehearsal for the last day; nonetheless, it was not the play itself. So the prophecies must be read as taking place in Jesus’ generation.

What are some of the prophecies? We read in Matthew 24:5, “There will be false Christ’s claiming, ‘I am the Christ.’” In Jesus’ day there were dozens of people who claimed to be the Christ, the redeemer, the mouthpiece of God. Simon Magus knew this, as we learn in Acts 8. Another man called himself a prophet and promised to divide the Jordan. There was an Egyptian who came with one thousand men and promised the walls of Jerusalem would fall at his command. All of this happened within thirty years or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection, just as He said.

“Wars and rumors of wars” (verse 6) were constant in Israel at the time, with much talk about rebellion against Rome. Within the Roman Empire, there were a number of wars in Egypt and elsewhere during

that generation. There were also famines and earthquakes (verse 7). The book of Acts describes a collection taken by Christians for famine relief in Jerusalem. Roman historians such as Tacitus recorded earthquakes in Syria, Antioch, and Aegea. Matthew 24:9 promises, “There will be persecution.” Certainly from Jesus’ day to the fall of Jerusalem there was much persecution of Christians. Jesus also says “The love of many will go cold” (verse 12). Josephus describes the unspeakable brutality of Jew against Jew even in the days when they were supposed to be fighting the Romans. In his view, more Jews were killed by Jews than by Romans.

Matthew 24:14 claims, “The Gospel will be preached to the whole world.” Our initial response is, “That did not happen”—but did it? In Romans 1:8, Paul says the faith of the Romans has been recorded all over the world. Colossians 1:6 and 23 say the Gospel has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. Was the Gospel fully preached throughout the earth? No. But was it preached to the entire world known by these people? Yes. Was the world fully evangelized? No. Yet, Jesus said that the Gospel would be proclaimed and that happened in that generation. Of course there is a further fulfillment to come, but this served as a foreshadowing of the final outcome. The Gospel will be preached to all the nations before the end.

There are other statements that clearly refer to the fall of Jerusalem rather than the final end, such as Matthew 24:15-19:

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!

That has to refer to the fall of Jerusalem. There would be no point in Jesus saying, “On the day of judgment, if you are on a rooftop when Christ comes, do not go get a cloak.” That would be nonsense. Why would you hope you were not pregnant or nursing? You cannot flee from Christ, so this has to refer to fleeing from Jerusalem. This teaching is one of the ways Jesus will preserve the church in order that it will not be destroyed by Rome.

You might think that there are some parts of Jesus’ teaching here that have to refer to the end of time. For instance, Matthew 24:29 says, “The sun will be darkened in those days, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, the Son of Man will appear and all the nations will mourn.” I think Jesus might be pressing on to talk about the judgment day, yet there is a sense in which even these things were partially fulfilled for Jerusalem. This cataclysmic language comes straight from Daniel and Isaiah’s prophecies about the fall of Babylon and Egypt. For the nation of Babylon, the day it fell would be the day when the sun was darkened and the moon would not give its light. The falls of Babylon and Egypt were like dress-rehearsals, warning people of that day that their own judgment was coming. But they are also pointing to the real final judgment.

Understanding that Jesus is primarily speaking of the fall of Jerusalem liberates us from the foolish quest to identify “that day.” It is sad that so many Christians have wasted so much time on charts and graphs and prophecy conferences, neglecting the words of Christ. He said, “You do not know the day or hour.” The signs that are given are not signs to tell us when the judgment day is coming. Rather, the signs were primarily given to the first century Christians so they would know what to do in the coming judgment on Israel and they would be preserved. They are not for our generation. Jesus’ word to our generation is

“No one knows the day or the hour.” Therefore, keep watch. Always be ready because you do not know the hour. If someone said the Lord is coming in the year 2018, what would you be prone to do? Slack off and get busy around 2017. If somebody said the Lord was going to come in 3022, that could be extremely harmful. But Jesus says we do not know the day. It will be the way of Noah’s days. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know on what day the Lord will come. Jesus repeats the idea five times to make it clear that we do not need to worry ourselves about the date. The issue is not *when* He will come but *that* He will come, and you ought to be ready when He does. It is not a timing issue but a spiritual issue. That is why I am saddened by prophecy conferences that set dates, examine signs, and make predictions.

Jesus then tells us four parables about getting ready (Matthew 24:43-25:30). The first is a simple one, barely a parable. Jesus says that He will come like a thief in the night. When is a thief in the night going to come? When you do not expect him. The point of the second parable is, since you do not know the time, do your duty while the Master is away. Take care of His household; do His work. Be faithful so the Master will be pleased whenever He comes. The third parable is the parable of the ten virgins. This parable reminds us again that Jesus will delay, but it adds this twist: it may be longer than you think. It will be long enough for you to get drowsy, even for you to say you are not prepared to wait this long. Are you ready to endure for a long time? That is the main question of the third parable. And finally, the parable of the talents makes the point that, while you are always ready and acting dutifully and while you are prepared to wait a long time, you must also be busy about the Lord’s work. Take what He has given you, multiply those talents, develop them, and then make a difference in this world so that when Christ comes, you will be commended for your toil for Him.