

Jesus' Prophecy in Matthew 24

This lecture will cover Matthew 24-27, focusing primarily on the trials of our Lord, including His betrayal, His judicial mistreatment, and His crucifixion. You know the end of the story so I am not ruining the suspense by saying that Jesus does rise from the dead, but we are not going to get to it yet. If there were no resurrection, this seminary would have no reason to exist. Everything stands on the resurrection. So while we will study it in this lesson, we do not want to separate it from these events.

In Matthew 24, before He dies, Jesus provides a number of explanations of why He has to die. At the end of Matthew 24 and beginning of 25, Jesus teaches that His death gives us life eternal and prepares us for the day of judgment. Previously we saw that Jesus predicts the future in Matthew 24, and most of the predictions are partially fulfilled by the year A.D. 70. That set of events, however, is like a dress rehearsal, a foreshadowing of the last day. The fall of Jerusalem is like the last day for the nation of Israel, their day of judgment.

While the fall of Jerusalem also shows us what the true last day will be like, Jesus explains that we will not know the day or the hour when that will transpire. Therefore we should not give our attention to timing, but to preparation. Jesus told a few parables to teach this point. The first emphasizes that the return of our Lord will be like the coming of a thief in the night. You do not know when the thief is coming so you must be ready (Matthew 24:44). The second parable, in Matthew 24:45-51, teaches that while you are watching and waiting and staying prepared, you should stay faithful. You should be like a wise servant, faithfully and carefully discharging so that when the master comes, he will be pleased. If he finds you abusing his possessions he will be cut in pieces and give you a place with the hypocrites, where there is gnashing of teeth. Next, the parable of the ten virgins tells us that we may have to wait for Jesus' return longer than we think (Matthew 25:1-13). If we think we know when the bridegroom is coming and then he is delayed so long that the lamp oil runs out, the people will get sleepy. So always be prepared to endure, Jesus says; the master may delay longer than you think. Then the parable of the talents adds the idea that not only may He delay, but you should be busy using your talents, those which God has entrusted to you (Matthew 25:14-30). You should be doing His work, doing His bidding, and your work will be evaluated at the end of time.

The parable of talents contains a number of rich ideas and one is that God entrusts us with much. The parable says the master gives his three servants five, two, and one talent, respectively. A talent is worth twenty year's wages, so the master is distributing a hundred years', forty years', and twenty years' worth of wages to these three servants. If Jesus were telling this parable today, He would use huge numbers like five million dollars. Thus, we would get the idea that Jesus gives us a lot—even the one that receives the least is given a great deal of money. The master leaves and two of the servants set to work. After a long time, the master comes back. When He meets up with the two who have made use of the talents, the words he speaks to the two are absolutely identical. In the original language, there is no variation at all. There is, for the one with five talents, a four-fold commendation. The master approves, praises, grants privileges, and, rewards the servant. Exactly the same language is used with the servant with two talents, which makes the simple point that God blesses us when we do what we should with what we have.

To use an analogy, imagine that God is a cosmic designer of cars. He designs some small, unexciting cars. He also designs station wagons, mini-vans, and big trucks that are comfortable to ride in, as well as luxury cars and sports cars. He is not going to berate the compact car for failing to go 150 miles per hour, nor is He going to berate the sports car for its poor fuel efficiency. He is pleased if the car does

what it is designed to do. The point is not that we are required to do great things, but rather that our responsibility is to do what God sets before us, to be the workers God wants us to be.

The trouble comes if you do nothing with your talents, and this is indeed what we find with the third servant. He says, “Master, I knew you were a hard man—harvesting where you have not sown—so I was afraid and hid your talent in the ground. Here, it belongs to you.” What do we call this? Playing the role of the aggressor. The servant shows that he knows he is in trouble by saying he knew it was impossible to please the master, so he did not try. He does not offer excuses but a disgruntled rant. The master answers with a four-fold condemnation, very similar in structure to what we saw before. First is a condemnation: “You wicked, lazy servant.” Second is a correction: “So you knew that I harvested where I did not sow.” Next is deprivation: “Take that talent away from him.” And finally is the punishment: “Throw that worthless servant outside.” The lesson is, if you only consider what you can do in comparison with others, you will always lose even the things you are best at, much less things you are bad at. Our responsibility is to do what we have to do with our talents and receive praise from Him.

What follows directly is the discussion of the last day, described in Matthew 25:31-46. On the last day Christ will return with His angels and gather the nations, separate them, and speak to the sheep and goats. Both the sheep and goats will hear His evaluation. Christ’s comments to them jar us, because they seem to teach salvation by works. Jesus says to the sheep, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you looked after me; I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Then Jesus speaks to the goats, saying that they did not do all those things the sheep did. Both parties say that they never noticed Jesus’ need. The sheep ask, “When were you thirsty and we gave you drink? When were you naked? When were you imprisoned?” The goats protest that if they had known it was Him, maybe they would have shaped up.

What can we say about this? The Bible consistently says we are judged based on our works. It is not found only one or two times, but throughout the Bible we are told that we will render accounts for the works done in the body—good or evil. We will have to defend or take into account everything we said and everything we did: Psalm 62:12, Jeremiah 17:10, Matthew 12 and 16, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 1 Peter 1:17, and Revelation 20. What should we make of this abundant evidence? Why does Jesus say this, and is this contrary to the idea of justification by faith? First, it is beautiful and fitting that Jesus judges people on the basis of their works, because then evil people cannot say, “I did not believe in You, but I did not know.” The works are there, however, they are public record. Christ can respond, “You did not produce deeds of love for others, let alone love for Me.” It is undeniable. Furthermore, what we do and what we say reflects our heart. So if we produce loving and kind deeds, deeds of justice, sacrifice, and mercy, it is because our heart was made new. And if evil thoughts and words proceed, it is because of an evil heart.

The British have a saying: “A true gentleman is the one who uses the proper fork when no one is watching.” There is a lot of truth to that. When Jesus speaks about judgment based on works, the important point is that we are judged based on what we did when we did not know anyone was watching. Of course we will do our best when we are in public, if only not to be put to shame. What really counts is what is in our hearts, and how that is worked out when no one is watching, or when someone needs help and we are really exhausted. That is what determines the basis for our judgment, according to Jesus’ words. Judgment on the basis of works does not undermine justification by faith because once our heart is made new, once our sins are cleansed, then we produce these things. And of course, the unbeliever never produces such things and stands on the judgment day for that. This happens

for all people on the last day, when all are arrayed before Christ. There is also our individual judgment on the day that we die. I believe there will be a review of our lives then, but there will also be a final, public view of everyone's life on the last day.

One might ask whether it is possible for an unbeliever to do good works. The answer is, "yes" and "no." An unbeliever can help an old lady walk across the street. An unbeliever can stop by the roadside when you have a flat tire. The question, however, is not whether an unbeliever can do approximate good, but whether one can do anything that is truly good before God. And the answer is "no," because ultimately unbelievers only do good out of some less than perfect motivation. Perhaps they do it for their own self image, or perhaps because they feel good when they help someone who is broken down. So they are helping another, but they are also helping themselves, and that may be the ultimate motivation. Or it may be that they do good because their mother told them it was right, or their dad did it and they want to live up to that reputation. Those are not exactly evil motivations, but they are not offered up to God, to glorify God or to praise God. They are ultimately done from human-centered motivation. For an action to be truly good, it must meet three criteria: the right standard (to be coherent with God's law or picture of righteousness), the right goal (the glory of God), and the right motive (love for God). The actions of Christians do not often meet those criteria, but a non-Christian can never meet them.

At this point, we also need to carefully consider the biblical truth that "love covers a multitude of sins." In the original context, this specifically meant that Christians should cover each other's sins with love. But this starts with God covering our sins with His love. From that perspective, first God covers our sins in justification. At the same time, He makes us new so we can produce good deeds. It is not that the good deeds are meritorious; God does not say, "Now I see you are a good person and you deserve My heaven." Rather, deserving heaven comes from having our sins remitted and receiving the righteousness of Christ. But God assures us that what we do still really counts—God still cares about it. It is important to Him and important for the sake of eternity because we really are changed and those deeds came out of that change.

On the other end of the spectrum, what do we make of the evil that comes out of the regenerate person? I have certainly sinned already today—how do I regard that? The unregenerate person, the non-Christian, will see sin or evil as a mistake or a flaw, and they will make various excuses for the behavior. A Christian looks sin in the eye, is sorrowful for it, repents of it, and asks God to make a change in his life. So when Christians sin, it is against their nature; they are not being their real selves and it feels wrong. When they do the right thing, it feels right; they take pleasure in doing the right thing because it is consistent with their real nature.

I want to move on to talk briefly about eternity because after the judgment, people wonder what comes next. What will heaven be like? One thing I notice about heaven from the biblical passages is that there will still be work. You will be in charge of many things. It will not be frustrating or stressful work, nor will it exhaust us, but there will still be work. There will also be accomplishments; the kings of the nations will bring their glory into heaven. Good music is work and we will be singing new songs of praise in heaven.

The most important thing we ought to say about heaven is what Paul says: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). This is really about the universal scope of redemption, but it does apply to heaven. People want to know exactly how things will be in heaven, but I often point out to them that if you trace the imagery too closely, you end up losing the picture God is trying to give. For example, in heaven we will have the

wedding feast of the Lamb, but 1 Corinthians 6 says that God will do away with the stomach. How do we make sense of this? We might also consider hell, which is described as a place of fire but a place of outer darkness. You have two different pictures: outer darkness being cold and dark, and fire being hot and light. Either way, you do not want to be there; they are bad places and that is the point. God's presence to bless is not there.

I recall the story of a little boy, four years old, who asked his mother, "Will there be pears in heaven?" The wise mother replied, "If you want pears, there will be pears." The meaning of the parable is, everything we want in heaven will be a righteous desire. If we want something, it will be there because our desires will be purified. While we cannot really understand how heaven works, we know it will be good and blessed, above all because God will be there, and we will stand as our true selves in the presence of God forever. Then we will have the harmony we are forever seeking.

The next passage for us to consider describes Jesus' last night with His disciples in Matthew 26. At this point in the narrative, the Passover is two days away, when the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. The disciples surely do not understand this and cannot comprehend that the Messiah could die this way. They never will grasp it until after the fact. Yet in some ways, we can view the next section as an answer to the questions: "How could the Christ die this way?" and "How can we understand this turn of events?"

The first answer is found in Matthew 26:3-5. The chief priests and elders assembled in the palace of the high priests and plotted to arrest Jesus and kill Him. The first thing we notice about His death is that the Jewish leaders were determined to kill Him. Quite simply, they were envious. It says in one of the narratives that Pilate knew that the Jews had turned Him over to them because of envy. Yet it is also true that they feared Jesus' ability to cause an upheaval. They thought it was possible that there could be an uproar because of Him and that the Romans might come and harm their nation, destroy the temple, or even harm them personally. It is not that Jesus was actively promoting a revolution, but they saw the fervor of those who were dedicated to Him. And they feared where that might lead.

It is also true that many of the Jewish authorities thought that they were doing the right thing. As a man named Kingsbury said:

"[In the mind of Jewish authorities] Jesus blasphemously arrogates to Himself the prerogative of God to forgive sins. He derives His astonishing authority to heal from collusion with Satan. He places Himself above the law and above our tradition. He dismisses our legitimate requests that He prove that He acts on authorization from God, and He impugns our ethics, and our authority as leaders of Israel He undermines."

You can see that they are convinced of their own righteousness in their plot against Jesus. Nonetheless, the Gospels do not let the authorities off the hook at all. While it may be true that the Jewish authorities did not actually kill Jesus, it is unquestionably true that they drove the Romans to kill Jesus. People accuse the Gospels of promoting anti-Semitism. It is unfortunate that people read them like that, but it is true that Jesus' own people rejected Him. That is one reason Jesus died.

Another reason Jesus died is for the sake of His people. The plots of the Jews in Matthew 26:3-5 are given a counterpoint in a scene of great love and devotion from a woman of Bethany in verses 6-13. We are informed in John's Gospel that this woman's name is Mary and she anointed Jesus with pure nard from an alabaster vile. The vile, or jar, together with the perfume, were worth a year's wages. I

mentioned before that the disciples ate barley bread that was used for horse food. How would you feel if you had been eating stale barley bread, and then you saw a year's wages gone in one outpouring? You would say, "What a waste!" And the disciples said, "What a waste. It could have been given to the poor." Among the grumblers, Judas was singled out. He took care of the treasury and the wasted money bothered him. So Jesus speaks. He says He understands their grumbling, but what she did was beautiful and it will be reported always in the memory of her. The poor will always be with us, but we would not always have Him. She did this to prepare Jesus for His burial.

You have to be very careful with this passage. It does not mean that Jesus devalues giving alms. He is not dismissing the needs of the poor. Instead, Jesus is supremely valuing His own life and death. We dare not use this as a reason to neglect the poor. Instead we must understand it as an unrepeatable event. Giving to the poor can be repeated. The woman's act cannot, therefore it is blessed. To put it another way, Jesus went to the cross because there are people who are His own and although they love Him, their love and devotion alone will not get them to heaven. This woman gave a tremendous sacrifice, but it does not get her to heaven. The one thing that gets her to heaven and that is Jesus' atonement. Her deed is significant, but it is not redemptive.

The next scene contrasts with this one—Judas betrays Jesus. People have stumbled over this. What does it mean? Why did Judas do this? All kind of reasons are proposed. Some say he really did always believe in Jesus, but He wanted to force Jesus to finally act, to finally reveal Himself, or to defeat the Romans. If Judas betrayed Jesus, then maybe Jesus would have to stop wasting time and finally do what had to be done. Some say Judas was just misguided. Others say Judas was a zealot and was upset with Jesus for not taking up arms against the Romans, so he wanted to get Him out of the way. There are many other suggestions.

However, the Scriptures speak to this issue in two important ways. First, Judas was not merely misguided. John tells us that Satan entered Judas. Second, Judas actively sought after the priests, and was partly motivated by greed. Matthew 26:15 claims that Judas said to the chief priests, "What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?" They gave him thirty silver coins, worth roughly one hundred denarii. He is upset about a woman wasting three hundred denarii, and then he betrays the Master, the Son of God, for one third as much! Thirty pieces of silver also happens to be the price of a slave. We are not told who determined the price; it could have been how much the priests thought Jesus was worth. The woman thinks Jesus is worth a year's wages, but here He is valued at a third of a year, as an ordinary slave. Having made that decision, Judas then provides the mechanism for Jesus' death.

The actual betrayal takes place partly during the Last Supper. All four Gospels record that Judas slips out during the meal. Notice that Jesus makes careful preparations to avoid interruption. In Matthew 26:18 Jesus instructed His disciples, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him the time is near. Tell him the Teacher says, 'I am going to celebrate with my disciples at your house.'" How did they find the man in whose house they would stay? He was carrying a water jar. Do you know who carried water jars? It was women. It is like saying, "Go into Jerusalem and look for a man carrying a big red purse." That is the equivalent. But that was the sign. This is an arrangement, not a miracle. He is planning to have a meal with His disciples so He can say a few more things about His death.

We presume that the meal takes place on Thursday night. Jesus took the role of the father in the reenactment. Exodus 12 and 13 says the family should celebrate the Passover and then the child should ask what all these things mean. Jesus is doing that; He is explaining what things mean, but He is also explaining some things the disciples have not heard before. He says He is going to inaugurate a new

covenant. He takes the bread and wine and says, “This is my blood of the new covenant” (Matthew 26:28). This is the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the one that will enable them to sin no more and to truly receive the blessings of God.

As Jesus is going through the ceremony, it is clear that He is the master of the situation. These elements no longer refer back to the Passover lamb and unleavened bread, but to the fulfillment of the Passover lamb. The earlier elements suggested God’s passing over sin, but they did not really cover sin. Jesus’ blood really covers sin, and that is what the wine represents. The unleavened bread suggested haste and purity. Real purity comes from Jesus’ body broken for us.