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Matthew 24:36 - 25:46

Living in Light of the End

Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the infamous day where thousands of civilians were killed by terrorists who hijacked airplanes and flew them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, in New York City, as well as the Pentagon, and an attempt to do the same to the White House. It was a tragic day, burned into our memories, as Americans. My wife Ashley and I were reflecting on it this weekend; even though we were both young at the time (I was only 7 years old at the time), we can both remember that day vividly, as I'm sure most of you can, as well. When we reflect on a day so tragic as 9/11, we're reminded of the clear, unmistakable reality of *evil* in this world, aren't we? We live in a day and age where moral relativity is taught in schools and lauded in politics and entertainment; but when we see such a tragedy as 9/11 unfold, it's a painful reminder that *we live in an undeniably moral universe*; that there is such a thing as objective good evil, right and wrong. There's no way to morally justify what took place on 9/11; there's no way to call that good; the only morally sane response is to mourn and grieve it, to name it as evil, and to call for *justice*. That pain, sadness, and speechless grief we feel in the wake of something so tragedy is a deep sense of how *wrong and evil* sin is - and it leaves us longing for *justice and peace*, for all things to be made right.

So then, it should be a reminder for us, as Christians, that *we have a sure hope*, even in the greatest of tragedies, because *we know that the justice and peace we long for are surely coming!* God has already told us where history is heading; he's already told us how the story ends. All of the evil, sin, suffering, and injustice running rampant in the world around us *will be dealt with*. Jesus Christ, the King over all, *is coming back!* And when He comes, He will put an end to all sin, evil, injustice, and suffering, *once and for all!* He will come bearing a sword that brings final, everlasting *peace*, as He puts an end to the wars and rumors of wars, to the false teachings and lies, to natural disasters, famines, poverty, sickness, even death itself! He will put an end, once and for all, *to sin and evil!*

That's gloriously good news, isn't it? What a beautiful end to the story of history that we have to look forward to! What a great joy and peace to know that's where all of this is heading! When Christ returns, He will bring salvation and deliverance *through the judgment of everything*

and everyone that is sinful, evil, and wicked. On that day, when Jesus returns, He will bring judgment and wrath against sin and evil, and eternal salvation, life, and peace for His people! But here's the catch: you see, we're all sinful; we're all wicked and evil; we've all rebelled against God and wronged other people. So the question is: when Jesus returns, will you receive judgment and wrath, or salvation and peace? Is Jesus's return a day you look forward to with joyful hope, or dreadful fear? Are you ready for the Day of the Lord?

That's the question posed for each of us in our passage this morning, **Matthew 24:36 - 25:46**. In this long passage, Jesus tells us how we are to think about His Second Coming and how we are to live our lives so that we are prepared for that final day.

I. We Must Be Prepared for Jesus to Return at Any Moment (24:36-51)

Jesus begins by teaching us a principle, and then the rest of our passage is made up of parables that illustrates that principle and teach us how to apply it to our lives.

We see the principle in 24:36 - "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." "The day and hour" refers to when Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, will return in "power and glory," as we saw from verses 29-31 last week; it's the end of the world as we know it and the dawn of a new one, when Jesus ushers in the New Creation and the full reign of His Kingdom. And the principle he's teaching us is simply this: *no one knows when that time will take place!* Not even the angels in Heaven; in fact, even Jesus Himself, the "Son," while He was on earth, did not know exactly when He would return! Therefore, *neither will we*. Jesus is certainly coming back! But we do not know when. His return is certain, but the timing of it is unknown; it will be sudden and unexpected.

Jesus gives us an illustration of what it will be like: in the days of Noah, everyone was just going about their normal, ordinary, mundane lives - eating, drinking, getting married, raising kids and eventually giving them off in marriage as well - when all of the sudden, a catastrophic flood swept across the whole earth, washing away all of sinful humanity with the floodwaters of God's judgment. Except, however, for Noah and his family, for Noah trusted God's Word and faithfully obeyed by building a giant boat, through which God saved Noah and his family. The parallel with how it will be at Jesus's return is obvious: we will all be going about our ordinary lives as usual when Jesus comes suddenly and unexpectedly; and when he does come, there will be two groups of people: those taken away in judgment, and those taken into eternal salvation.

As we see in verses 40-41: “Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.” The point is, simply: Jesus will return suddenly and unexpectedly, without warning, breaking into our normal, ordinary lives; and when He does, everyone will immediately be gathered up and separated into these two groups: those who receive eternal judgment (which we all deserve), and those who receive eternal salvation - which we don’t deserve, but receive by the mercy of God by trusting in Jesus; if we’re in Christ by faith, then we will be safe just like Noah was safe in the Ark.

So two important points to take away, then:

1. First, when Jesus comes, it will be sudden, unexpected, and unpredictable. It will be like a thief in the night whom no one expects, as the parable of vv.43-44 show.
2. Secondly, when Jesus comes, it will immediately usher in the day of *final judgment and salvation*. We see this again in verses 45-51: it will be like two servants who were left in charge while the master was away: the one who is wise and faithful receives reward and blessing; he is ready for the master to come at any moment, even after a long delay! But the one who is wicked will be caught off guard and enter into judgment - “in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v.51).

“Therefore,” Jesus says, in v.42, “stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” We know he’s coming; we know it will be a day of both final judgment and eternal salvation; therefore, *we need to vigilantly watch and wait*. We must be *prepared and ready* for Him to return at any moment.

But how exactly do we do that? Well, I *don’t think* this means we’re supposed to try and figure out when exactly this time will be. If Jesus, in His humanity, did not know when, then no other human being could possibly figure it out. There are scores of books, movies, and conferences out there all about trying to “read the signs” and predict when Jesus is coming - but that will never work, and that’s emphatically *not* what Jesus wants us to do! He’s already told us no one will know; it won’t be predictable.

So how can we be ready? First and foremost, by *truly being Christians!* By believing this Word, by acknowledging our sin and the fact that we deserve God’s wrath in Hell, and by trusting Jesus to save us, by His grace, through his death on the cross in our place! That’s the only way to be ready. But we can’t just *wait to do that*. He could come any moment. Therefore, we must repent and believe *every day*. We must live a life *following Jesus!*

And that means...

II. We Must Be Prepared to Faithfully Endure a Long Delay Until He Returns (25:1-13)

So my last point was, “be ready for Jesus to come at any moment!” But we must also be prepared Jesus to delay for a long time - just as He already has done! This is, I think, the point of the parable of the Ten Virgins, in 25:1-13.

In the story, there is a wedding festival going on - a much longer and more elaborate affair than we’re used to, today. And ten young, unmarried girls had a part to play: they were to wait outside until the bridegroom came, and form a torch-lit procession leading to the wedding feast. This usually happened in the evening - which is why they had lamps, or torches. But the bridegroom was delayed much longer than expected - he was late. So they all fell asleep - but then are suddenly awakened - he’s come! It’s go time! Five of the girls were prepared - they brought extra oil and had plenty to last the night; but the other five were not prepared and ran out. When they were off busy trying to find oil, they missed their chance - the five prepared ones accompanied the bridegroom to the feast, while the other five were locked out of it.

The distinguishing mark between the five foolish and five wise girls is *preparedness* - the five “wise virgins” have enough oil, no matter how long a delay might take (25:4); the “foolish virgins” did not bring any extra and were not prepared for the delay; consequently, they are not prepared for the bridegroom when he does, in fact come (25:2-3, 8-12).

The wise, prepared girls represent faithful Christians who are prepared to endure faithfully throughout this age, trusting and obeying Christ in this age of tribulation, no matter how long the delay may take.

The foolish, unprepared girls are “shut out” of the wedding feast. They knock on the door, saying, “Lord, Lord,” yet the bridegroom says to them, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (25:12). This sounds hauntingly similar to Matt. 7:23: “I never knew you; depart from me.” The issue is perseverance - this represents those who claim to be Christians, but they grow tired of waiting upon the Lord; they do not persevere. They lose sight of the sure hope held out for us in the gospel of Christ, and fall away.

We must be prepared for a long delay until the second coming of Christ - no matter how long such a delay might be; it’s already been a 2,000 year long delay - we must be prepared for

another 2,000 years until He comes as well. We don't know when Christ is coming - but we don't know how long that will be; we must be prepared to faithfully endure for the long haul, without ever giving up hope - He will surely come!

And this means we must be prepared to faithfully endure in Christ to the end of our lives, no matter what. True Christians persevere; true Christians do not fall away. It's easy to get excited about something in the short-term, isn't it? It's harder to persevere for the long-haul. It's easy to run down the street. It's much harder to endure a marathon. But that's exactly what Jesus calls us to: the Christian life is a marathon. We are called to faithfully endure to the end - and that means, even when we don't feel like it.

So here are two practical applications for how we can be *prepared for the long haul*:

First, this is why it is so important that we each build healthy spiritual habits and disciplines into our lives. Each one of us needs a regular, daily diet of studying the Bible for ourselves. Each one of us needs to regularly spend time with the Lord with prayer. Because the only way to be saved is to *personally know Jesus Christ, trusting in Him and what He has done for you, by grace through faith!* This means you need to know Jesus personally. It's not enough for any of us to say, "Sure, I had an experience of Jesus last year," or ten or twenty, or forty years ago - the question is: do you know Jesus *now*? Are you following Him as Lord *now*? We prepare to persevere in Christ throughout our entire lives by *intentionally carving out time with the Lord, time in the Bible and prayer.*

But we can't *just* do the Christian life on our own; this is why the second preparation we all need to make is to be members of a local church. We need *each other* to help us persevere throughout the Christian life. There will be days when you doubt God's goodness and love; there will be days when you give into temptation and sin; there will be days when the world seems more important than the far off day of the Lord's return. And that is why each one of us desperately needs to be united to a church family that will love us enough to strengthen our faith, rebuke and call us to repent, and encourage us to persevere! So let's all be prepared to endure to the end; let's all be prepared for the day of the Lord *together*, by being committed to one another as church members, as a church family.

Next, we see that...

III. We Must Be Prepared by Advancing the Lord's Work with What He's Given Us (25:14-30)

The call to “stay awake” and be ready for Christ to come doesn't mean sitting around twiddling our thumbs - we're called to *prepare!* We prepare by *following and serving Christ, furthering the Lord's work until He returns.* And this doesn't mean just maintaining the status quo or rehearsing the motions - it means *actively furthering Christ's mission with all that we have.*

Jesus clearly illustrates this point in the parable of the talents, in 25:14-30:

There's a wealthy man going on a journey, and he entrusts his servants to be good stewards of “his property” while he's gone. He gives them varying “talents” - which are vast sums of money - according to each servant's ability to manage and invest them well (vv.14-15). The first one received five, wisely invested them into trade, and doubled the profits. The second, with two talents, did the same. But the third, with only one talent, didn't work to manage the funds - he literally just buried them in the ground. He is passive and apathetic. He “played it safe,” by burying the talent so that he would not lose it; he might have claimed it was wise, but the master condemns it as “cowardly” (v.26). He did not take any risks - but not because he cared about his master, but because he only cared about himself. His apathy reveals his heart: it reveals that he did not love and trust his master, but despised him.

Each one of us is like these servants: we've all been made steward of every gift the Lord has blessed us with. Every resource we have - even our very life and existence - belongs to God - it is a gift to us from Him! And He gives it to us to invest for His glory, our good, and the good of others. This includes our money, our time, our abilities, our education, our experience, gifts, and talents - any resource you have is from the Lord. And we are given them *as stewards - we are to be good stewards of what the Lord has given us by using them for the glory of God, the building up of His church, and making disciples of the nations.*

We all have different gifts and abilities, different levels of resources, income, education, knowledge, and areas of aptitude and service; the point is not about the types or amounts of gifts and resources we've received from God, but rather, *what we do with them.* It doesn't matter if you've received a little or a lot - what matters is, are you being a faithful steward of what the Lord has given you for a time? Are you actively using your resources to further the Lord's work?

So this is why we regularly give a portion of our income to the church, as church members - because all of our money comes from God, and He's given it to us, in part, to support the mission of the church - because the local church is where discipleship happens. This is why we give money to support missions and church planting, through the country and the world.

But this goes beyond money. Any resource you have is from God. So we're each called to use our resources - our money, time, abilities, gifts, musical talents, physical strength, knowledge or experience - for serving the Lord, building up fellow believers, sharing the gospel, and making disciples. My prayer for each of us is that we ask: "Why has God given me these particular resources? How can I best use these for His glory, the good of the church, and salvation and discipleship of the lost? How can I not bury my "talent," but invest it in the kingdom of GOD?"

Because when we do this, we're showing that we're *ready for the Lord to come*. The way we use our resources reveals where our heart is. What you spend your money on shows what you think is most valuable. How you spend your time shows what you prioritize. So we should all ask ourselves: "What does my bank statement reveal about my heart? What about the way I use my time and abilities?" What do we prioritize more: the Lord, His church, and making disciples throughout the World? Or our own comfort, pleasure, and entertainment?

The way we steward our resources and lives reveals where our heart is - it reveals whether or not we're prepared for the Lord to come. And this is very important, because....

IV. We Must Be Prepared to Give an Account For How We Have Responded to Christ and His People (25:31-46)

We finally reach the climax of the passage in vv.31-46 - a parable of what will happen when Jesus finally "comes in His glory" and "will sit on his glorious throne" (v.31) As we've already seen, Christ's return ushers in the final judgment of "all the nations" - of every person in the world, of the living and the dead. The judgment scene plays out like a shepherd separating the "sheep" from the "goats" (vv.32-33). All of humanity is divided into two groups: the sheep, who trust Christ and receive salvation in "the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (v.34); and the "goats," who receive judgment against sin, to whom he will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v.41)

This is what's at stake - the eternal state of our souls. THAT's what will be at stake when we stand before the Lord and give an account. And that's what we see going on here: Jesus giving a verdict on the account of our lives. But what exactly do we give an account for?

Well, you might say, "Hold on a second! Jesus judges them here *because of good works they did or didn't do!*" So is this saying we'll be saved by our good works? No, of course not; we're saved by faith alone! But saving faith is never alone - it is revealed by the vindicating evidence of how we live our lives. And that's what Jesus does here - he points the specific evidences of faith in the lives of the "sheep" - of true Christians.

But the evidence of faith Jesus points to here might surprise us: Jesus says the "sheep" are those who "gave me food," "gave me drink," "welcome," "clothed," and "visited" me (25:35-36). When they ask what he means, the King says, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (v.40). When Jesus says "my brothers," he's talking about *Christians*. Jesus so identifies with us believers that he calls us members of *his own body*; as he told Saul in Acts 9, when people persecute Christians, Jesus takes it personally: "Saul, why are you persecuting *me?*" Likewise, when we love each other, as Christians, *Jesus takes it personally, as us loving him!* True sheep show their love for Christ (and thus faith in Him) by their *love for one another!* But goats (non-believers) show that they do not love or believe in Him by their lack of love for Christians.

Therefore, what Jesus is saying is profound: one *absolutely necessary, essential mark of true Christians* is that we *love Jesus by loving His people - our fellow Christians*.

Because, ultimately, the way we treat other Christians reveals *how we've responded to Jesus*. The basis for whether or not we're saved on the final day of judgment is *whether or not we've responded to Jesus Christ in faith, by trusting in the glorious grace of His gospel*.

The distinguishing mark between the sheep and the goats is *faith in Christ Jesus*. But faith in Christ is *visible* in our lives, here and now. It is accompanied by fruit of the Holy Spirit within us, by evidence of our faith in Christ. And this isn't just a matter of preference, or something extra that would be nice if possible - it is *essential*, as underscored by this judgment scene. The goats are separated from the sheep precisely because they rejected Jesus by rejecting His people (25:41-46). Lone-wolf, solo Christianity is not biblical Christianity. We cannot claim to be a Christian and love Jesus if we reject His people and have nothing to do with the church.

Our love for Christ and faith in the gospel will be revealed, at least in part, by our love for the church, His people, - our brother and sisters, our fellow Christians!

Conclusion

So if you are a believer this morning, trusting in the gospel of Jesus CHRIST, persevering in faith, and living your life in service to the Lord and His church - then praise God! Rest in His strength as you press on and continuing preparing for the Lord to return, looking forward to that day with eager gladness, for it will be a day of everlasting joy!

But some of you sitting here today, perhaps the Lord has revealed to you that you *aren't* ready for the Lord to return; that you *aren't* prepared for the day of judgment.

Perhaps you claim to be a Christian and believe the Bible and gospel, but you've been living a life of pursuing sin and worldliness, without repenting of it whatsoever; maybe you've been convicted today that your life looks more like a wicked servant than a faithful one, and you're wondering just how Jesus would respond to you if He walked in today. If that's you, then simply *repent and turn away from your sin and turn to the Lord in faith*; confess your sin to the Lord and to fellow Christians, ask the Lord for forgiveness, and truly believe the gospel in your heart, that *Jesus Christ did everything necessary in His life, death, and resurrection to save and forgive you of that sin!* Rest in His glorious grace, and trust that you are forgiven and righteous because of what Christ has done, not because of what you have or haven't done! And then, ask the Lord to help you to love, trust, and obey Him more as you seek to deny sin and obey Christ.

For others today, perhaps you've claimed to be a Christian for a long time, but you're not confident that you can point to evidence of your love for Christ's people, your fellow Christians, in your life. Perhaps you've been convicted of the fact that you're not part of a gospel-centered church family. If that's the case, then you can respond by joining a healthy, biblical, gospel-preach church family, where you can invest your "talents" well, love the Lord by loving His people, and be loved by the church as they help you to grow in Christ and prepare for the Day of the Lord. If that's you this morning, then I would love to speak with you about church membership! In fact, I'd encourage you to come to our new membership class in a couple of weeks, on October 3rd!

Lastly, perhaps the case for you this morning is that you're not a believer - that you've never placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior; perhaps the Lord has revealed

your sinfulness, that your life has not been good enough to stand up the Lord's account of your soul, and you fear what judgment you would receive on the Day of the Lord. If that's you, then there's glorious news for you today! Even though you could never be good enough for God, Jesus Christ has been good enough to save you! Simply turn to Jesus in faith, trusting that He lived a perfect life in your place, died on the cross for your sins, and rose from the grave so that you can be raised to eternal life with Him! Cry out to Him for mercy and forgiveness, and trust in His unending love and grace for you! And then, be baptized to publicly demonstrate your faith in the gospel, and join a gospel-preaching church as you begin your walk with the Lord.

If you have any questions about any of this, I would love to speak with you. You can come now, or find me after the service. Let us pray.