

March 14, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

How to Wait For the Son

Matthew 24:36 – 25:13

This morning I would like to take a brief departure from the book of Thessalonians to turn to the gospel of Matthew and study a few of the parables Jesus taught His disciples as He was preparing to go to the cross. These were in response to the disciples questions about when they could expect His return and the end of the age. And as we have been looking at this letter to the Thessalonians through the lens, so to speak, of living in the light of Christ's return, I believe Jesus' word to His disciples here in Matthew will help us, as it no doubt helped the disciples, in knowing how to wait for His return. The first part of chapter 24 in Matthew talks about the signs of His return and what will occur. But from verse 36 in chapter 24, on through the end of chapter 25, the focus is on how to wait for His return and that is what I want to look at today. I will warn you, however, this is a long message – but take heart, it comes in two parts. This section of Matthew has five extended stories that each have instructions on how to wait for the Lord Jesus and this morning we will look at the first three. And then, Lord willing, we will look at the final two next Sunday.

Waiting with Anticipation

"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Matthew 24:36 – 44

Jesus compares the characteristics of the days during Noah's time before the great flood with those of the days before His second coming. And we know from Scripture that the days preceding the flood were filled with violence and evil and the *'...wickedness of man was great on the earth, and every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually'*. Genesis 6:5 And we might conclude that Jesus was saying something about the fact that His second coming would be when things were again this bad. But the text doesn't tell us that. The point in the text here is that things were normal. People were eating and drinking and marrying and loving and working and paying taxes and living life as usual. Except one guy down the road who was building this monstrous thing called an ark. But everyone else was doing what they normally did. The emphasis in the text is that life was going on as it always had, and no one had any clue that destruction was right around the corner. Noah was preaching it. We know this from the apostle Peter who called him a **preacher of righteousness** in 2 Peter 2. But apparently no one was listening. They were too busy getting on with life. And then seemingly without warning it started to rain and didn't stop for forty days and by then it was too late. They weren't ready – and when it was over, only eight people remained.

And then in almost the same breath, Jesus paints another picture: *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. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.* Matthew 24:40-42 In the tradition of the ancient world, the two men are likely related, as are the two women – two brothers, or a father and son, two sisters or a mother and daughter. But the point is that the Lord's coming is so unexpected and sudden that one is taken and one is left. Right in the middle of everyday life – working in the field and grinding at the mill – Christ returns. I have heard two conflicting interpretations of the taking and leaving. One version is that those who are taken are taken by Christ and those who are left are left for judgment. And the other is that those who are taken are like those in the days of Noah who were taken away by the flood and those who were left were those saved by the ark and left on the earth. But that isn't the point of the text. It really doesn't make much difference how you interpret the taking and the leaving here. Because the point is that they are eternally separated by His coming. One brother was ready, one was not. One mother was ready, one daughter was not.

And the final picture in this section is the picture of the thief: *But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.* Matthew 24:43-44 **And the point of the story is not that Jesus is a thief – but rather that His coming is unexpected.** I remember years ago our family left on a short trip and one of our youth pastors stayed in our home to watch it. In this case, he knew we would be coming back on a certain date and so he was prepared to have the house in order when we returned. The problem was that we returned a day early – and he was not expecting us. He was, quite frankly, shocked by our appearance. All his living was exposed on that day. And so it is with our Lord's return. We don't know the day or the hour. So we must live in anticipation.

And the point of all of these stories is exactly the same: **wait for the Son with anticipation.** Wait as those who do not want to be surprised and unready for His coming. Wait for the Son in the midst of everyday life – doing what you do – eating, drinking, sleeping working, in joy and in mourning, in gladness and in suffering – wait with anticipation of His return. **The emphasis is not that we can't tell when He's coming, but rather we can't tell when He's not.** It may be today, it may be tomorrow, it may be before we finish this message.

And the consequences for unreadiness are severe. If we are to judge by the account of Noah with which Jesus begins this section, most were destroyed. Or even if we take the second story – there was still a 50 percent loss. The message here to the believer is we cannot know when Jesus is coming back so live in anticipation and readiness. And the message to the unbeliever is that there is coming a day which spells destruction for those who do not anticipate the return of Christ and live in readiness. And the end of that day is destruction and eternal separation for them. On the one hand, no one knows the day nor the hour and on the other, we cannot say that this is not the day He is returning – **so live anticipating His coming.**

Waiting with Faithfulness and Wisdom

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

First of all, notice the contrast and similarities between the two types of servants here: faithful and wise versus wicked; serving others versus serving oneself; careful exercise of authority versus abuse of authority. Apparently both are servants of the master, and so applying the lesson of this parable, apparently both are followers of Christ. Both have positions of authority, but only one exercises that with faithfulness and wisdom. One takes his responsibilities seriously, expecting the master's return as he is fulfilling them. The other seems to have given up on his master and begins to abuse his position. I believe that what is pictured here is the fact that **in the church there are those who are genuine followers of Christ living right alongside those who have the name but not the reality.**

Earlier in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells another parable that I believe explains this: *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares? And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn." Matthew 13:24-30*

The thing about tares is that they look just like wheat until the time of harvest. It is really hard to tell them apart until everything ripens – and then the difference is unmistakable. But in the meantime, these tares cause a lot of damage. There are people in the church today who are tares. For lots of reasons there are those who have a form of godliness but not its reality and they lust for the temporal rewards of power, prestige and money. They are not committed to serving others, building up the body of Christ or denying themselves for the sake of the gospel. They are wicked power-hungry, money-grubbing pretenders. They have a thin veneer of Christianity that is stripped off when the Master returns and they are revealed as hypocrites – one who plays a part.

And the text says that the Master cuts them to pieces and assigns them a place with their own kind – hypocrites – and that is where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Dr. Ian Paisley, the fiery Irish cleric and politician was reputed to have been preaching one Sunday on the end Times - and in particular on the day of judgment. As he reached the climax of his address he said that on the day of judgment "there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth". At which point an old woman put up her hand and said "**Dr. Paisley, I have no teeth**". Paisley replied "**Madam, teeth will be provided**".

There are those who claim that this parable is only talking about degrees of reward. That is, both are true servants of the master, but the faithful and wise servants have more reward than the wicked servants. But we need to understand that the adjective wicked is never used in the Bible to describe those who are Christ's – only those who are not. And furthermore these wicked slaves get cut to pieces and thrown in with the hypocrites, a fate inconceivable for those for whom Christ paid the penalty of sin and for whom He absorbed the wrath of God. A short word study in the Bible will reveal that the label hypocrite nearly always refers to those people whose religion is a sham and who think they know God but don't. At least six times Jesus says, '**Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!**' And several times He simply says to them, '**You hypocrites**'. To be assigned a place with the hypocrites is not a good thing. It is rather a judgment on those who are not really believers. And so during this time of delay, we are exhorted to faithfulness in carrying out all that the Master has assigned us as His servants and not to conclude that since He delays we may simply play at the tasks He has given us. Because the end is coming and we will give an account of our stewardship – whether faithful or otherwise. And above all, I want to hear from my Lord's own lips, '*Well done, thou good and faithful servant!*'.

Waiting with Perseverance

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. Matthew 25:1-13

The interpretation of this passage have been many and varied throughout the years. Many spend a great deal of energy interpreting the meaning of the lamps and the oil and the flasks and the virgins and miss the central point of the message. Some say the oil represents good works – you have to have enough good works to get into the marriage feast. Others say 'No, no, no, the oil represents the Holy Spirit and you have to be filled up with enough of the Holy Spirit to make it into the marriage feast'. But the text doesn't tell us what these things represent, and it really doesn't matter here.

To understand this parable, we need to understand how weddings worked in Jesus' day. First of all the focus was not on the bride, but the groom. Quite the opposite from today. Today weddings are more about the bride than the bridegroom. In fact when weddings get written up in the social section of the newspaper, there are massive amounts of detail about what the bride wore, what she looked like, what her bridesmaids wore and how they looked, and so on. And then they will usually note that '**the groom was also present**'. But when people got married in Jesus' day, the emphasis was on the groom. He would first go to the brides home and there would be a small celebration with a few close family and friends. And then there would be a grand procession with dancing and singing all the way back to the grooms home. There the ceremony would be performed and the real festivities would begin. These might last several days, depending on the wealth of the groom.

So the picture here is that the groom has gone to the brides house and the family and friends have spent an overlong time there – so much so that it has gotten late and instead of coming back in the daylight to make a procession to the grooms house for the ceremony and extended celebration, darkness has fallen and still the groom has not made an appearance. People are lining the streets waiting for him to come and lead the procession, but he, for whatever reason, delays. The point of the story is not about oil or no oil or whether the virgins are all believers or what the lamps represent. **The whole point of the story is that the delay means that some are not ready.**

Some brought enough oil in case there was a long delay. They anticipated that the groom might not come before dark. But those who didn't bring enough oil, had to leave their places and go to find more oil for their lamps and while they were gone, the groom comes and the five wise virgins follow the bride and groom to his home for the marriage feast, and the doors are shut. All who were ready got in. And the five foolish ones were excluded.

The consequences are massive: *But He answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.'* Essentially the groom was saying, ***'If you were my friend, you would have been ready. If you really knew me, you would know that I would eventually come. You would have been prepared to join the procession. You would have endured the delay. I don't know you!'*** The first parable speaks to the fact that **He could come at any time – this parable speaks to the possibility that it could be a long time.** Just as we need to anticipate His coming at any moment, we need to embrace the possibility that it could be a long time. As you read the epistles, you get a sense that even back in the apostle's day, there was an air of expectation that Christ's return was just around the corner. Paul told the Romans: *Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.* Romans 13:11 Peter says *The end of all things is near therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.* 1 Peter 4:7

But there was also the acknowledgment that His coming might be delayed as we count delay, and thus we need to persevere. Paul in Romans 2 hints that if Christ delays it is only a demonstration of His kindness to allow more to hear the gospel and come to repentance. And Peter says to those who scoff because Christ seems to be delaying that what seems to be delay is only because He is not willing that any should perish. *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.* 2 Peter 3:9

What we need to understand from this parable first of all is that **genuine Christians persevere.** They are simultaneously anticipating Christ's return at any moment, and perfectly content to continue if He seems to delay. Perseverance, endurance, **hupomone**, is an integral part of a real Christian. Hebrews 2:14 tells us: *For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.* Jesus told those who claimed to believe in Him in John chapter 8: *If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.* Perseverance is how we wait for the Son.

We also need to understand that those who are not ready for a long delay may simply be finally excluded on the last day. I don't know about you, but I don't want to hear those words the five foolish virgins heard, *Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.* There is something so awfully final about the door being shut

Finally, If we are to be prepared for the possibility that His return will be delayed, although we are to be ready for Him to come at any time, **we need to always take the long view.** The long view says that although Christ could come at any moment – in fact He could come before you hear the rest of this message next Sunday – although we need to hold that expectation, we need to order our lives in such a way that His delay means that we invest our time long term. We are training our children for Christian ministry later in life. We are raising up leaders in the church to carry the torch for the next generation. We are building for the future – even if that future culminates tomorrow. We are not resting on our laurels or sitting on our hands. We are engaged in kingdom stuff in our day as David was in his and we expect that the Lord will say of us as He did David *'He served the Lord in his generation'*. In short, **we wait with perseverance.**

Our gracious Father and God,

Grant that we would be filled with anticipation of Christ's soon return. Do not let us be shocked or dismayed by His coming, but instead be found with ready hearts and eager expectation. Let all our waiting be filled with faithfulness and wisdom and may we be found doing what we ought when the night of this world will turn to glorious light at our Master's return. Grant O Lord, the strength and grace to wait for the Bridegroom's return with perseverance and joy.

May our waiting with eager anticipation, with faithfulness and wisdom and perseverance keep us from lusting after the deadly delights of this world; may it cause us to endure in heart and mind the loss of any earthly comforts; may it help us walk with joy through suffering and the valley of the shadow of death; may it work in us the image of the heavenly and fill us with joy as we wait for the Son, we pray in the precious and saving name of Christ Jesus our Lord, our soon returning King, Amen.