

Matthew 24:45-25:13

Introduction

The disciples have asked about the timing of the destruction of Jerusalem and the “coming/Parousia” of Jesus at the end of the age. They anticipated that His Parousia (His public revelation in glory as on the Mount of Transfiguration) would be perhaps within a matter of weeks or months.

Jesus responds by taking the disciples as far out as He can go with respect to clear timing. The second coming at the end of the age will not happen until you have experienced the “labor pains” of false Messiahs, famines and earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the world, betrayal and apostasy within the church, and also the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the whole world. So this puts the second coming out probably at least twenty, if not thirty, or even forty years. Even more specifically, the second coming at the end of the age cannot happen until the disciples have seen the period of great distress and tribulation associated with the destruction of Jerusalem. These things must all happen first, and they would all happen within that first generation of Jesus’ disciples. And then these things would all continue to happen as the constant, ever renewed “signs of His coming” throughout however many generations might follow. But then immediately after the tribulations of this age will come the end. The Son of Man will return to this earth with power and great glory, and He will send out His angels to gather (rapture) His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

But now Jesus has to caution His disciples. The disciples asked for a “sign” of Jesus’ coming at the close of the age. Jesus gave the disciples’ plenty of signs, but here’s the point: The accomplishment of these signs in that first generation of the disciples could only mean that His coming was “near” and “at the very gates.” The sign that the disciples had in mind was something that would actually identify the *timing* of Christ’s coming. But such a sign, Jesus says, He cannot give to the disciples. “When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates [that’s as far as I can go]... but concerning ***that day and hour*** no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” When the Son of Man comes, He will catch the world entirely at *unawares*. They will be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and suddenly the Son of Man will return and tread the wine press of the fierce wrath of God the Almighty. On that day, it will be *too late* for any repentance or last minute change of heart. Even for the true disciples of Jesus, the coming of their Lord and Savior will be at a time that they are not at all *expecting*. And so it’s in light of these things that Jesus repeatedly exhorts us to *live every day* in light of the “any-momentness” of His coming (especially ever since the destruction of Jerusalem).

- ✓ Matthew 24:43–44 — 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*.

Stay awake, watch, and be ready. That’s the main point. At the end of the day, that’s what it’s all about. Every day of our lives, we should be in a constant state of alert – of wakefulness, and

watchfulness, and readiness. But are we? Jesus is so concerned that we *get* this simple truth that He goes on to emphasize it with three more simple parables – the parable of the wise and foolish servant, the parable of the ten virgins, and the parable of the talents. This morning, we’ll look at the first two.

I. Matthew 24:45–51 — “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.”

In one sense, there’s really nothing that needs to be said. All we need to do is ask ourselves the question: Which servant will we be? The faithful and wise servant or the wicked servant? Isn’t that the obvious question? Isn’t that the only thing that matters? When Jesus comes back, will He find us living our day to day lives without any *real and pressing* concern for the final judgment? Or will He find us faithfully fulfilling the responsibilities that He has entrusted to us *in the full expectancy and anticipation of His return*? That’s what it *means* to stay awake and to watch. That’s what it practically looks like to have our fingertips and noses pressed against the window. This is *how* we live with uplifted faces.

To stay awake and to watch means going about our lives every day as faithful and willing servants of Jesus so that when He returns He may find us in the very act of living for Him. We must not be lulled into apathy and sin because of His delay. We must never say to ourselves, “There is still more time before Jesus returns,” because then we are guaranteed to lose some of that sense of true *urgency* in our everyday Christian living. In Jesus’ parable, it’s the wicked servant who says to himself, “Jesus won’t be coming for a long time.” In Jesus’ parable, it’s the wicked servant who says that Jesus’ return could not be at any moment. So we have to fight against this every day. We need to work to live every day with a sense of the immediacy and the “any-momentness” of His coming, and so therefore a sense of the urgency and the necessity of being *always* about His business. Every delay eventually comes to an end. So when Christ returns at a time that we don’t expect, we must be *sure* that we are *ready*.

And just in case we should try to comfort ourselves with thoughts of walking the fence, notice that Jesus makes things very black and white. There is the faithful and wise servant whom the master finds fulfilling his responsibilities when he returns. And there is the wicked servant who beats his fellow servants and who eats and drinks with drunkards. There is the servant who is blessed and set over all of His master’s possessions. And there is the servant who is cut in pieces and put in a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The Bible knows of no gray area and no middle ground. *If* there is any such area, then it’s not for us to presume on, and we do so only at our own eternal peril. Jesus never mentions a servant who is halfhearted in fulfilling His master’s will, and yet on the other hand is courteous to his fellow servants and avoids the company of drunkards. Jesus never mentions any happy medium. There is no third category of servant. He is either faithful and wise, or he is wicked.

So which of the two will we be? When Jesus returns, will He find us shirking our responsibilities, and presuming that we'll at least have tomorrow? Or will He find us in the very act of living our lives for Him – living every day in light of the reality of the “any-momentness” of His coming? Deep down, we all know what that means. We know if we are, or if we're not. And we know if we're trying to do the impossible, and walk the fence.

- ✓ Revelation 22:12, 14-15 — Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done... Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.
- ✓ Hebrews 10:25 — Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.
- ✓ James 5:8 — Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.
- ✓ Philippians 4:5 — Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.
- ✓ 1 Peter 4:7 — The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.
- ✓ Romans 13:12 — The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

If we're not ready at that moment when Jesus comes to gather His church, then it will be too late, and Jesus will assign us to a place with the hypocrites, where there is everlasting weeping and gnashing of teeth. In other words, the teaching that after a secret rapture there will still be a chance for repentance is a dangerous teaching that is contrary to the Scriptures. The teaching that those who are presuming on more delay will have a wake-up call when the rapture happens, and then a second chance for repentance before the final coming of Christ (which will no longer be unexpected) is a teaching that may well damn many people to hell. The Scriptures teach that when Christ comes to gather His church, then those who were not ready will be eternally lost.

These are the realities that we need to *live* in light of every day. The way to be ready is to be found in Jesus. And the way to have true assurance that we will be found in Jesus on that day is simply to be always and faithfully about our Master's business. In the preface to his commentary on Romans, Martin Luther writes: “O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them. And is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever.” (Luther; quoted in Bruner) Do you have the full assurance of faith? Are we living day by day in constant “readiness”?

II. Matthew 25:1–13 — “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 [probably wooden torches with one end wrapped in oil-soaked cloth], they took no [extra flasks of] oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed [*perhaps* finalizing negotiations with the bride's father], they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him [for a joyful processional to the groom's house?].’ 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.”

And once again, does anything really need to be said? Will we be like the five foolish virgins or the five wise virgins? It’s really very simple. There are some who try to read into this parable some very unique and very specific teachings about the end times. There are others who try to give everything a special meaning – like the meaning of the oil, or the meaning of the number five, or the meaning of the sleeping, or the meaning of asking to borrow oil from the wise virgins, or the meaning of the wise virgins refusing to share their oil, or the meaning of the virgins going out to meet the bridegroom. But all of these attempts must be rejected.

Both the foolish *and* the wise virgins became drowsy and fell asleep. The problem is not that they slept. That was natural and understandable. The problem is that five of the virgins were not prepared for the bridegroom’s delay. And since they were unprepared for his delay, this meant that they were also unprepared for His coming.

The wicked servant *presumed* on his master’s delay and so he began beating his fellow servants and eating and drinking with drunkards – as though he would never be called to account. The five foolish virgins, on the other hand, were *surprised* at the bridegroom’s delay, and so when he did *finally* arrive, they simply weren’t prepared. We must never presume on more delay, lest at the very time we are presuming on His delay, He should come. On the other hand, we must not be surprised or caught off guard by more delay lest when He comes, He should find us unprepared. In other words, the key to being prepared for His coming is to be prepared for delay.

We must live not for the short-term, but for the long-term *because* we know neither the day nor the hour. Jesus never intended for us to assume from the “nearness” or the “any-momentness” of His coming that the Christian life is just a short sprint to the finish line. We must live and prepare and train every day not for the sprint, but for the long and drawn out marathon. The foolish virgins brought only enough oil to last them a few minutes. The wise virgins brought enough extra oil to last them until midnight and even beyond. So here’s a tension: The only way to be truly ready and prepared for the “any-momentness” of His coming is to be preparing, and training, and strengthening ourselves every day for the possibility of *delay*.

✓ Hebrews 12:1 — Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Are we living and preparing and training every day for the marathon of the Christian life? Are we *daily* counting the cost before putting our hands to the plow? The reality is that we all know if we are, or if we’re not. This is the only way to truly be sure that we will be *ready* at the Parousia of Jesus. When Jesus comes to gather His church, if we are caught unprepared, then it will be too late. The foolish virgins tried desperately to make last minute preparations. They tried

to borrow from their companions. They rushed out to buy oil from the dealers. But all to no avail. When they finally arrived at the marriage feast, the door was shut. And when they asked that the door be opened, the bridegroom responded: “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” I want to warn us all again that there will be no secret rapture after which there is a second chance for repentance. The Scriptures teach that when Christ comes to gather His church, then those who are found unprepared will be eternally lost.

Conclusion

“Our Master... knows the sleepiness of our nature. He knows how soon we forget the most solemn subjects in religion. He knows how unceasingly Satan labors to obscure the glorious doctrine of His coming again. He arms us with heartsearching exhortations to keep awake, if we would not be ruined for evermore. May we all have an ear to hear them... True Christians... should seek to keep their hearts in such a frame, that whenever Christ appears, they may at once give Him a warm and loving reception... We may well doubt whether we are true believers in Jesus, if we are not ready at any time to have our faith changed into sight.” (Ryle)

- ✓ 1 John 2:28 — And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.
- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 5:6 — So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

On the one hand, we must work to live every day with a sense of the immediacy and the “any-momentness” of His coming, and so therefore a sense of the urgency and the necessity of being *always* about His business. On the other hand, we must be living and training every day for the possibility of a long delay so that when He does finally come, we will not be caught unprepared. On the one hand, we must never presume on more delay, for He could come at any moment. On the other hand, we must never be surprised at more delay, because no man knows the day or the hour.

What matters is that Jesus *is* coming back. On that day when Jesus comes back, will he find us in the very act of living for Him and being about His business? Will He find us orienting all of our daily living around the one great reality of His Parousia? That’s what it *means* to stay awake and to watch. That’s what it practically looks like to have our fingertips and noses pressed against the window. This is *how* we live every day with uplifted faces.

- ✓ Titus 2:11–13 (cf. 1 John 3:2-3) — The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ***waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.***