

MATTHEW 24-25

In chapter 22 Jesus is engaged in heated debates with the religious/political leaders of Israel and the storm clouds over Jesus' fate are gathering. In 23 Jesus let's loose publicly, denouncing the leaders for their false religiosity which will be destructive for the nation. The chapter ends with Jesus' lament over Jerusalem and the fate of Israel he anticipates. In Chapter 24, Jesus speaks clearly, although using apocalyptic imagery, to describe the fate of Israel beginning with it's most sacred symbol – the temple.

24: 1-35 – The end of the road for Israel as a nation foretold.

From where the disciples were sitting, the future was hard to understand. Jesus speaks about all that will happen. He speaks about the end of the world. But is it, literally, the end of the world, or a kind of end of the world as Jews know it? Several key events are conflated together, events that all point to the vindication of Jesus as the messiah of God.

- 1) Jesus' resurrection and ascension. From the point of view of heaven, Jesus "coming" is about his ascent to heaven not his descent back down to earth. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new age, the age of the Spirit. Resurrection begins now, even though it will only come to completion in the age to come when there will be a general resurrection of the dead. In the mean time, those who are bound to Christ in faith are those who experience resurrection within their lives now, resurrection after they die, and participation in the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age.
- 2) The destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and Israel as a nation. Things will come to a breaking point by 70 AD. Looking back, readers of Matthew's gospel now understand what Jesus was talking about when he was talking about the end. The end of the world is the end of Israel as a nation, the end of an age. Jesus' vision for Israel was diametrically opposite to that of Israel's official leadership. They were promoting a vision of revenge and military/political revolution against Rome, a vision that also promoted hatred, racism and a zeal for Israel to get right with God by observing religious law (believing God would act to save them this way), but failing the heart of the law which is love as forgiveness and the work of reconciliation and peace. Tragically (Jesus laments this), Jesus' vindication is that Jerusalem and the temple will in fact be destroyed as he predicts.
- 3) The gospel of Jesus as risen Lord, King of the world, will be taken and spread throughout the then-known world. This is not a triumphalistic prediction. It's not that the world will respond and the majority of people will become Christians. Rather, it is that the gospel will spread like yeast in the leaven, like seed in the ground. Only now, the ground is no longer just Israel, but the whole world.

These 3 elements are all present in this chapter, even though there are many symbolic images taken from the book of Daniel (a very popular book of prophecy in 1st century Palestine) to describe it. Daniel also speaks about destruction to come, about the desecration of the temple by pagan hordes, about the resurrection of the dead, of one

like the "Son of Man" who represents God's messianic liberation. Daniel was an excellent vehicle for Jesus to convey things about the future people could never quite imagine.

Jesus also predicts that trouble will come. But by giving his followers a map of how things will turn out, he was giving them the tools to endure persecution, as well as the resistance to false messiahs. They were being told what to look for and why it would happen.

24: 36-51 – Necessity for Watchfulness and Faithfulness

Given what will take place, Jesus tells his followers two more things. First, once the ball gets rolling it will move faster and faster. Things will happen unexpectedly. Be prepared for it. Don't be surprised when it happens. Second, being prepared means that you begin today to live as faithful servants of Christ. Don't wait till tomorrow, because tomorrow may be too late. The end of the world may come tomorrow or the end of your life. Either way, it will be too late to do tomorrow what you must do today.

The parables of Chapter 25 are intended to be further elaboration of what Jesus' followers are to do today while they await Christ's coming. Whether the end will come as destruction, death, or the very second coming, here is how they must live today to be prepared.

25: 1-13 – Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids

This parable is about being ready to meet the Bridegroom (the messiah is often described as the Bridegroom). What does it mean to be ready? Jesus has given his sermon on the mount and much other teaching – about compassion and forgiveness, about repentance and the effort at peace and reconciliation with others, about sincerity of heart, honesty, humility, gratitude as a way of life, about priorities in life detached from our money and possessions, about serving rather than status in the world, giving and caring in tangible ways that heal others...

We must ask ourselves: are we ready if we died or Jesus came today? It's not about being perfect. It's about being in the right place within, a combination of humble gratitude for the grace and forgiveness of God which we need constantly as food and drink, but also our humble attempts at tangible compassion, repentance, forgiveness, responsibility and integrity in our relationships...

25: 14-30 – The Parable of the Talents

- 1) Talents are money, but they also represent all the resources and gifts "talents" we have been given in life.
- 2) The focus is on the servant with the least amount. This is important. Nothing is too little in the eyes of God. He is not treated as in any way inferior because he has less. It's not about quantity but quality. It's about being responsible and trusting of what God has given you even if you think it's nothing. It's about believing in

yourself because God believes in you. That's what the gift of life is about – God's faith in you.

- 3) The servant in question is judged not because he is helpless or weak. Rather, he refuses to risk, to extend himself, to do even a minimum to express his gratitude for the life he is given. Those who use what they're given discover that there is always more. Those who refuse to use what they're given find out in time that even what they have is no longer satisfying or fulfilling.
- 4) Even though these parables end with judgement, let us remember that Jesus is going to that place of judgement himself (hell). There is infinite mercy and grace in God, once a person recognizes their need for God's mercy. It's about a relationship. Where there is no relationship there is absence and isolation. That's what hell is – separation from God. To be in relationship with God is to have the infinite mercy of God. That is heaven when it is experienced. It is the source of eternal peace, security and freedom.

25: 31-46 – The Judgement of the Nations

This is, perhaps, among the best known of parables in the bible.

- 1) The least of these to whom tangible mercy is shown are not judged according to whether they are good or bad people. Their circumstances of need define them as those to whom tangible mercy must be shown.
- 2) Jesus identifies with such need. We are to see the people to whom we minister as reflections of Jesus and therefore as the image of God. To give to someone in Jesus' name (because we are followers of Jesus), is to give to Jesus himself. God in Jesus is acting through us in the very act of giving, and God in Jesus is in the recipient as well, receiving. God is everywhere in it as source, journey and destination.
- 3) Those who are the wicked are those who are self-righteous, confident that they are truly religious (clearly the hypocrites Jesus accuses the religious leaders of being). Those who are truly righteous, are those who give, serve and love without thinking about it. It has become so naturally a part of their focus and way of life that they do it matter-of-factly. And so they ask: "When did we see you....?" Too much charity and good works are done with an eye to reward of some kind, acknowledgement or a need to please others. To do it quietly, anonymously, but also to receive gratitude without it getting to our heads.... This requires maturity of spirit.
- 4) As in earlier parables, the standards are high. But having high standards is a good thing. It motivates. The key is direction. What God requires, and the content of righteousness is important. What direction is our life facing? We may be just a little or a long way into the journey. That doesn't matter as much (different number of talents) as the fact that our lives are facing the right direction. There is not only a lack of religion in our society but the wrong kind of religion. Jesus whole focus is to help the disciples understand what true righteousness is all about, and then to get started on a journey toward it, knowing ahead of time that the mercy and grace of God welcomes them as those who have already arrived even before they have started. What a wonderful promise and hope.... If we can believe it.