

# ***“What Not to Do When You Don’t Know”***

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***Anyone who ever said “The end is near!” was wrong...and right.***

***Matthew 24:1-14***

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## ***Authority to uncertainty***

It’s hard to know what to do when you don’t know what’s going to happen. Consider the pandemic. No one has known exactly what would happen with the virus, the government, schools, churches, and business. We all instinctively strive for greater control of outcomes. When we don’t know what’s going to happen and it’s out of our hands, life is so much harder on our hearts and on our bodies.

It’s also hard when you know what’s going to happen but don’t know when. Consider childbirth. A baby’s parents usually don’t know when labor will begin. It seems to me there are more “Do Nots” than “Dos” while you’re waiting. Don’t stay awake all night because labor might start anytime. Don’t hop on a 12-hour intercontinental flight. Don’t keep an Uber waiting at your front door 24/7.

The focus of Matthew 24-25, the last of Jesus’ “discourses” in Matthew, is an event that Jesus says you can know will happen but you can’t know when. As we’ll see, Jesus’ most important instructions while you wait are “Don’ts.”

Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been teaching *with authority* about the kingdom of God – what it is and how to act. Jesus’ disciples know much more than they knew three years earlier about spiritual things. Jesus knows and he told them. It must have been unsettling when Jesus told them there’s something he doesn’t know.

The “Olivet Discourse” has prompted much speculation and strong debate about Jesus’ meaning. If you are hoping that I will clarify the correct interpretation and why

any alternative view is inadequate, you're going to be disappointed. If you know enough about various theories of the end times to disagree with my interpretation, you need to know that I'm OK with that. This is in the category I call "Convictions" – biblically-based arguments that are nevertheless not essential to our faith. It's what Norman Geisler calls "intramural orthodox" debates among Christians. We can go head to head but we're still on the same team.

### **Overview**

Chapter 25 includes three parables which we will review in reverse order.

*Sheep and Goats (25:31-46)*. There will come a day of separation between good and evil. Self-interest will be eternally severed from love, which Jesus graphically illustrates with feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, and clothing the naked. I find it very comforting to know that we won't have to struggle with sin and evil forever. It's even more comforting that Jesus will be the one holding everyone accountable. I trust him to do the right thing at the end, don't you?

*Bags of Gold (25:14-30)*. Jesus sets up the Sheep and Goats with a story about a master who leaves town for an indefinite period of time. He entrusts his money to his servants, who do not know when he's going to return. When the master does return, he is livid with one servant who buried his one bag of gold. He should have been using his resources to do the master's work. Self-interest had immobilized him.

*Ten Virgins (25:1-13)*. Jesus sets up the Bags of Gold with a story about ten bridesmaids at a wedding. Five "wise virgins" prepare ahead so they are ready at any moment for the bridegroom's arrival. Five foolishly unprepared virgins are locked out of the wedding banquet. Even if you don't know the day or hour of the wedding, be ready.

The parables in chapter 25 support the primary message of 24:30-51. As he ends his visible presence on earth, Jesus promises his disciples that he will come back "on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory" (30). However, "About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (36).

*Nobody* knows when, but *everyone* should remember it will be a day of accountability. "But we didn't know when you were coming" is not a pass. Precisely because that day will be unexpected, everyone should "keep watch" at all times.

Jesus sets up that message in vv. 15-29 by predicting an event that we now know was much closer to his own day, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus and his army in AD 70. For Jesus' disciples in about AD 30, and presumably for Matthew's readers about three or four decades later, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the Second Coming of Christ melded into one future, catastrophic intervention by God, as is often the case in biblical prophecy. Future events that might play out centuries apart are like rolling hills in the distance, with one obscuring the next.

## ***Not the end yet***

In today's reading, the disciples set Jesus up for this discourse with a statement that at first seems inconsequential. At the end of this long Tuesday of confrontation with the religious leaders on the temple mount, the disciples "call attention to its buildings" (1). Undoubtedly, they had been to that site many times. But they're like visitors to the Grand Canyon or New York City who say, "No matter how many times I see this, it takes my breath away."

The original temple on that site had been constructed by King Solomon, and had stood for four centuries until Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian war machine had razed and burned it in 586 BC. The Persians had allowed the Jews to return home in the next century and to rebuild their wall and their temple, but by then they were poor refugees and the replacement was inglorious. When Herod the Great came to the throne, he was not considered an ally or friend of the Jews, but he ingratiated himself to them by funding a massive expansion of the stone platform as well as a reconstruction of the temple itself and construction of support buildings at the edges. The project continued for decades after Herod's death and was largely complete on that Passover week when Jesus was crucified. The final touches would not be finished until AD 66.

Jesus shocked the disciples: "Do you see all these things? Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (2). His words were not literal, if applied to the entire platform. One can still see the foundation stones in place, some as large as 400 tons. It's a marvel of ancient engineering. But in AD 70, having put down a Jewish revolt everywhere except Jerusalem, the Roman general Titus allowed Passover pilgrims into the city and then cut off all egress and supplies. It would be like allowing New Orleans to bulge with residents and guests for Mardi Gras, then not allowing anyone to come or go for five months.

Inside, the faithful believed God would come to their rescue, but they grew desperate for food. When the Romans finally breached the walls, they slaughtered not only soldiers but children and women. Titus had wanted the temple reconstituted for the worship of a Roman deity, but his enraged men burned everything that would burn and literally threw every movable rock over the edges of the platform. The destruction was like that of Manila in World War II. Josephus says more than a million Jews died and 97,000 were taken captive.

For the disciples, that level of catastrophe had to portend the end of time. Thus their two-fold question in verse 3. As they sat across the Kidron Valley overlooking the glorious site from the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked Jesus, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

The part of Jesus' response we read this morning (vv. 1-14) chronologically fits between verses 29 and 30, in my view. If verses 15-29 are about the desecration of the temple in AD 70 and verses 30-51 are about Jesus' second coming "with power and

great glory,” verses 4-14 are about the time of waiting for either one when you know it’s going to happen but you don’t know when. So from then until now, these verses apply.

Verses 4-8 speak of “the beginning of birth pains.” The labor that results in the birth of a child seems interminable, according to those who have been through it. (To state the obvious, I’m not telling you this from personal experience.) The discomfort seems unbearable, and from there it gets worse until the baby arrives. Jesus compares waiting for God to bring down the hammer to waiting for the final push that will expel the baby and bring joy that creates amnesia about the suffering.

During that painful time of waiting, Jesus says, “Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah’, and will deceive many” (5). In addition, there will be “wars and rumors of wars” (6). As nations and kingdoms face down their enemies, famines and earthquakes add to the misery. What’s important to note about all those manmade and natural disasters is that “the end is still to come” (6). It’s not yet.

The same is true of vv. 9-12. Persecution from the unbelieving world (9), betrayal from within the church (10), false prophets (11), and the “increase of wickedness” (12) – these are not signs of the end. They are to be expected during the entire period of time between Jesus’ first coming and his second. It is precisely the long delay that results in this: “The love of most will grow cold” (13).

When you know the finale is approaching, you are passionate and vigilant. When you’re told it’s coming and but nothing happens, you become negligent and idle. This is precisely why Jesus gives the parables in chapter 25. Don’t let it happen to you!

It’s “the one who stands firm to the end” who “will be saved” (13). Jesus knew that within a generation there would be those Peter speaks of in his second letter – those who say, “Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” So, Peter asks, “What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (2 Peter 3:4,11-12).

How do you “speed its coming”? Back to Matthew 24. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (14). There’s mystery in that verse as well, but if there’s anything we can do to advance the coming of the Lord it’s to keep spreading the Gospel.

### ***What not to do***

Much of what I’ve been saying is not new to many of you. Whether it is or not, let me tell you what was fresh to me this week in the study of a passage that has generated more heat than light across the years.

If you examine Jesus' words carefully in the first fourteen verses of Matthew 24, you notice that there are only two direct commands. I don't want to diminish the importance of what else Jesus says, including what we might call implied commands. When Jesus says, "the love of most will grow cold," he does mean to say, "Don't let that happen to you." When he says, "the one who stands firm to the end," that's not in the form of a command, but he means he wants you to stand firm to the end. When he says, "this gospel...will be preached to all nations," he wants you to be about that business. Those are all implied commands.

But there are only two direct commands in today's text, and that's what captured my attention. I deliberately skipped over them so I could give them emphasis at the end of this sermon. The first is in verse 4: "Watch out that no one deceives you," The second is in verse 6: "See to it that you are not alarmed."

Both begin with a similar word that uses a metaphor of open eyes: "Watch" and "See." Our children will tell you that when they were learning to drive, their mother's favorite word was, "Watch!" (It's possible she might still occasionally use that word with her husband, especially as I grow older. She didn't precisely use the word, but when I was driving her car into an unfamiliar parking lot Friday night to meet our daughter for dinner in Rock Hill, SC, Linda stammered out, "Watch..." and I said something like "What?" as the back tire bounced over a curb on her side of her car.)

When Jesus says twice, "Watch..." he follows both times with a negative command. Remember, we're talking about the long period of time when you know what's coming but you don't know when. What does Jesus say is most important? "Don't be deceived" and "Don't be alarmed." The context for both is the reminder that wars and natural disasters are going to happen.

Encyclopedia Britannica lists about 125 major wars since the time of Jesus, forty of them since 1900. I suspect it's an incomplete list. How many more times have there been "rumors of wars"? As for earthquakes, the US Geological Survey estimates 55 earthquakes happen every day, 20,000 a year, or 400,000 since the time of Christ.

Seemingly every time there's a major conflict among nations – especially involving the Middle East – and every time there's a newsworthy natural disaster – not only an earthquake but something like a pandemic – some well-meaning (or otherwise) student of the Scriptures says, "The end is near!" It's almost amusing, but not really, to review the end-time predictions through the centuries. Let me give you just a few.

- AD 70 – The Essenes (Qumran) based it on the Jewish uprising.
- AD 500 – Irenaeus was among several who chose this year.
- AD 1000 – Pope Sylvester II and others chose this round number.
- AD 1501 – Christopher Columbus figured the world had been reached.
- AD 1530 – Martin Luther wrote, "All is fulfilled."
- AD 1844 – William Miller based his prediction on the book of Daniel

- AD 1988 – Harold Camping gave 88 reasons for Jesus’ return in 1988.
- AD 2000 – The list of people predicting that date or before include Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight, Tim LaHaye, and Jerry Falwell.

Then of course there are always those who don’t name a date but insist all the signs are in place. As an impressionable teenager with a passion for the Bible, I heard Jack Van Impe at Woodrow Wilson High School’s auditorium in Portsmouth, Virginia, who had me convinced we’d never get out of 1971 without the rapture.

Here’s what everyone who ever predicted the coming of Christ on a date or soon had in common. They were all wrong. And they were all right. This is Jesus’ point in Matthew 24-25. The end is always near. Keep watch. Be ready. Repent. Don’t let your love wane. And preach the gospel.

But remember, there are only two direct commands in Matthew 24 – both preceded by “Watch.” First: “Watch that you are not deceived.” Second: “Watch that you are not alarmed.”

Jesus says there are two values most important to him: truth and peace. One truth no one can claim to know is when the end will come. Whoever claims to know that truth is necessarily not speaking truth. Even Jesus, while on earth, didn’t know. That’s a mystery, but is it possible even he didn’t realize that the destruction of Jerusalem was to be separated by two thousand years from his Second Coming? He didn’t want his followers obsessed about figuring out what they can’t know and don’t need to know.

Peace is the other value. When you consider the perplexities of end times theology and the plethora of theories about it, if you wind up panicked or anxious, you didn’t wind up where Jesus wants you. “My peace I give to you,” he would tell these same disciples three days later, just prior to his death. “Don’t let your hearts be troubled.” It’s OK. God’s got this.

It’s fascinating, isn’t it, that human beings in general – and Christians are no exception – spend a lot of time and energy debating things no one can know. I get more questions about issues Christians have never been able to settle in 2000 years, like predestination v. free will or the age of the earth or yes, the end times. Sometimes I think people believe the mark of a good preacher is to settle once and for all puzzles no one else could solve. I think just the opposite.

Focus on what you do know. Do what you know to do. And learn to trust God with the rest. Along the way, don’t be deceived and don’t be alarmed. Focus on truth and focus on peace. Amen.