

Chapter 100: An Hour You Do Not Expect

Matthew 24:36–25:13

Now that Jesus has prepared his disciples for the tribulation they will endure, and the vindication of him that they will witness, at the destruction of the temple, Jesus must teach about the end. While Jesus gave many details of what to expect, including a timeframe for when to expect it (“this generation will not pass away”; Matt. 24:34), Jesus gives no such promises in Matthew 24:36–51. Instead, Jesus only warns that his return will be unexpected. Then, in Matthew 25:1–13, Jesus explains what his disciples must do as they await his eventual return: to make preparations now knowing that Christ may return at any point. In Matthew 24:36–25:13, Jesus instructs his disciples to *expectantly prepare for Christ’s unexpected return*.

Christ’s Unexpected Return (Matt. 24:36–51)

At 24:36a, Jesus shifts to a new subject, which he signals by the transitional phrase “But concerning...” (περὶ δὲ; *peri de*). Jesus himself used this same phrase in Matthew 22:31 to shift emphases in his refutation of the Sadducees’ question about marriage and the resurrection, and Paul uses this extensively in 1 Corinthians “to move from one of the issues raised by his correspondents to another (cf. also Acts 21:25; 1 Thess 4:9; 5:1).”¹ Here, Jesus uses this transition to shift from answer the first question of the disciples about “these things” related to the destruction of the temple, and to begin answering their second question about “that day” of his final return (see Matt. 24:3). France makes an important observation also about the shift from “these things” *plural* (referring to the tribulation and the destruction of the temple) and “that day and hour” *singular* (referring to his final return at the end).²

Whereas Jesus had given explicit instructions to his disciples about how to prepare for, and what to expect in the tribulation leading up to, the destruction of the temple, Jesus now has a different method to prepare his disciples for his final *parousia* at the end: “In short, he wishes his disciples so to walk in the light of faith, that while they are uncertain as to the time, they may patiently wait for the revelation of him.”³ Specifically, Jesus rejects the idea that there will be any kind of obvious “sign” to alert his disciples of his return.

To underscore the point that no one will be able to discern the time of Christ’s final return, Jesus insists that no one knows the day or the hour, “not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (24:36b). This statement of the ignorance of “the Son” has prompted much discussion, and there are two important factors to help us understand what Jesus means. First, in the context,

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 936–37.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 937.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:153.

Jesus is speaking regularly about the “Son of Man” (Matt. 24:27, 30[x2], 37, 39, 44), a human figure who is presented before the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:13–14. Therefore, it may be that Jesus is explicitly speaking about the human “Son of Man” rather than the divine “Son of God.”⁴ Second, even if Jesus is truly speaking of himself according to his divine nature as the Second Person of the Trinity, it is common in Scripture to find statements about something that the person of Christ did according to *one* nature, according to language that refers to the *other* nature (e.g., Acts 3:15; 1 Cor. 2:8).⁵ This phenomenon is called the “communication of attributes” (*communicatio idiomata*), and it depends on the fact that the two natures of Christ were perfectly united in a single person. Thus, the same divine *person* died on the cross (even though God cannot die), and is ignorant of the time of his final return (even though God is omniscient). In the mystery of the hypostatic union of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ, Jesus is telling us that he (according to his humanity) did not make use of his divine omniscience.⁶

Instead, his disciples will need to prepare themselves for the unexpectedness of his return by living in a manner that is appropriate to his calling: “Readiness for those climactic events can be achieved only by living all the time in such a way that their unannounced arrival need not be a disaster but rather a time of praise and reward for a life well lived and opportunities well taken. Each parable [in Matthew 24:45–25:46] in turn adds further substance to the reader’s understanding of what it means to be ready.”⁷ In this study, we will examine why Jesus’ disciples must be ready, and then two parables that illustrate the need for readiness in the face of Jesus’ unexpected return. In the next study, we will consider two parables dealing with the practical instructions of how Jesus’ disciples should live in the meantime (Matt. 25:14–46).

Jesus begins to explain the unexpected nature of his return in terms of the “days of Noah”: “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,

⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 991.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 955. See also *Westminster Confession of Faith* 8.7: “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.”

⁶ “As to the first objection, that nothing is unknown to God, the answer is easy. For we know that in Christ the two natures were united into one person in such a manner that each retained its own properties; and more especially the Divine nature was in a state of repose, and did not at all exert itself, whenever it was necessary that the human nature should act separately, according to what was peculiar to itself, in discharging the office of Mediator. There would be no impropriety, therefor in saying that Christ, who *knew all things*, (John 21:17) was ignorant of something in respect of his perception as a man; for otherwise he could not have been liable to grief and anxiety, and could not have been *like us*, (Hebrews 2:17.) Again, the objection urged by some—that ignorance cannot apply to Christ, because it is the punishment of sin — is beyond measure ridiculous....For (as I explained under that passage) he did not absolutely say that this was not in his power, but the meaning was, that he had not been sent by the Father with this commission, so long as he lived among mortals. So now I understand that, so far as he had come down to us to be Mediator, until he had fully discharged his office that information was not given to him which he received after his resurrection; for then he expressly declared that power over all things had been given to him, (Matthew 28:18.)” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:154.)

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 936.

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” (24:38–39). Now, in the days of Noah, their “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” were acts of sinful rebellion against the Lord. Immediately preceding the flood narrative is the story of sinful marriages, where “the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose” (Gen. 6:2). That verse has been variously interpreted; however, it is clear that those marriages were sinful, since the Lord immediately withdraws his Spirit from humankind as a response (Gen. 6:3). Then, we read that “the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). This statement covers the entirety of human action and experience, all the way down to eating and drinking—that is, Jesus seems to be speaking about riotous and gluttonous eating and drinking.⁸ The idea of “eating and drinking” often refers to feasting, which can be used in a positive sense (Luke 22:30) or, more commonly, a negative sense (Luke 5:30, 33; 7:34; 1 Cor. 10:7; 11:22; 15:32). This warning, then, is not about those who are engaged with “normal life,”⁹ but with a sinful and rebellious pursuit of pleasure in the face of warnings of a coming judgment—like those who ignored and mocked Noah as he built the ark, instead carrying on with blissfully partying.¹⁰ Just as the flood came unexpectedly, “so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (24:39).

Next, though, Jesus insists that some will be engaged in normal life precisely when Jesus returns: “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” (24:40–41). Here we have “two men at work...balanced by two women at work.”¹¹ In other words, Jesus talks about the ordinary pursuits in which all will be engaged at his coming, both men and women alike. In each of these pairs, one is taken, and the other left. It is unclear which is the desirable status. Blomberg argues that the word “‘taken’ in 24:40–41 (though a different verb in the Greek) parallels ‘took’ of 24:39 and suggests that those taken away are taken for eternal judgment (not ‘raptured’), while those left behind remain with Christ.”¹² Nolland, on the other hand, argues that the “potentially negative nuances of which ‘left’ (ἀφίεται [*aphietai*]) is capable (‘left out’) make it more likely that being taken off to salvation is intended, as by the angels in v. 31.”¹³ Regardless of which one is which, Jesus contrasts what the fate of the two will be at his final coming.

Next, Jesus warns that his return will be as sudden and unexpected as the break-in of a thief in the night (24:43): “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (24:44). We must, therefore, make proper preparations for the return of Christ before that day comes: “The tendency of these words therefore is, that the warning of Christ should arouse us; for, though the last judgment be delayed for a long time, yet it hangs over us every hour; and, therefore, when there is ground for alarm, and when danger is near, it is unreasonable that we should

⁸ So Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:156.

⁹ Pace France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 939.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:157–58.

¹¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 994.

¹² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 366.

¹³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 994.

be sluggish.”¹⁴

Finally, Jesus offers a short parable to give a special word of warning for those set in authority over his people—specifically for the rulers and officers of the church. Jesus asks, “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?” (24:45). On the one hand, Jesus will richly bless the servant who is faithfully doing what his master has charged him to do when the master returns (24:46–47). On the other hand, Jesus sternly warns against those who would abuse their authority: “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” (24:49–51). Thus, while all will give an account before the Son of Man at his *parousia*, the servants to whom Christ has entrusted authority will need to give a special account to how they have stewarded that authority.¹⁵

Our Expectant Preparation (Matt. 25:1–13)

In the next section, Jesus provides a parable to illustrate “the kingdom of heaven” as similar to “ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom” (25:1). Of these ten, five brought oil for their lamps, while the other five did not. As a parable, Jesus is telling a story that illustrates the absolute folly of the five without oil, since, “A torch without a jar of oil was as useless as a modern flashlight without a battery.”¹⁶ There have been many attempts to determine with precision the symbolism of the lamps and the oil. While we should not approach this story as an allegory, we can probably say a little more than what someone like Hagner is willing to say: “The focus of the parable is the simple matter of preparedness versus unpreparedness and the tragic character of the latter.”¹⁷ Calvin is probably right to see this as symbolic of a long-term endurance of zeal.¹⁸ Or, Lenski cannot be far from the truth when he writes, “Lamps without oil are the forms of Christian life that are without the substance of this life; lamps together with oil are the forms that are vitalized by the true Christian life.”¹⁹ Both commentators get at the notion that Jesus has in view the presence or absence of true spiritual vitality. What can appear satisfactory outwardly for a time will be exposed as unsatisfactory at the final coming of Christ.

There are two major challenges to interpreting the details of this parable. First, we know something of the wedding rituals to which Jesus is referring, but it is perhaps unwise to try to draw too many implications from supposed background material, to which Jesus may or may not have had in mind. It should be noted that Jesus does not give us his own explanations to why the bridegroom

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:164.

¹⁵ “...drowsiness would be peculiarly disgraceful and inexcusable in pastors.”(Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:165–66.)

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 949.

¹⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and Ralph P. Martin, WBC 33B (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 728.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:170.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 964.

was delayed, or why the ten virgins went out to meet the bridegroom. This is in contrast to the fact that he explains the reason that some brought oil, and others did not: namely, some were wise, and the others foolish. Jesus' explanations for actions should drive our interpretation of the passage.

Second, it is difficult to interpret what we should make of the sleep of the ten virgins. While some have interpreted sleep as symbolic of death, others have seen in this sleep a failure to keep "watch" as Jesus later instructs us (25:13).²⁰ We should notice again, however, that Jesus does not assign praise or blame to the sleep itself. The women simply became drowsy and fell asleep. Morris even writes, "In the circumstances to sleep was a good idea. All their preparations had been made, and from the time the bridegroom made his appearance they would be kept busy for a long time. To sleep while they could was an opportunity not to be missed."²¹ Instead, Jesus puts all of our attention on the comparative wisdom and foolishness of the virgins, distinguished by whether or not they remembered to bring oil for their lamps.²²

The question of readiness arises when someone announces the arrival of the bridegroom and calls the guests to come out to meet him (25:6). At this point, the virgins rise to go out, first trimming their lamps and then, for those with oil, lighting them (25:7). It is only at this point that the foolish virgins realize their mistake and ask the wise virgins for oil: "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out" (25:8). The wise decline the request, explaining, "Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves" (25:9). The point of the parable is not that the wise virgins are stingy, but that they did not have enough, since every individual needed to have her own oil prepared.²³

After the foolish virgins were able to buy their oil, they sought to enter into the wedding feast only to find the door shut (25:10). Although they cried out to the Lord to open to them (in language reminiscent of Matthew 7:21–23), they are denied entry.²⁴ Rather than admitting them late, the bridegroom declared, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you" (25:12). Because they were not prepared when the bridegroom came, they missed their opportunity to enter into his feast. Jesus concludes with a sober warning: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (25:13). As Hagner points out, this watchfulness is the primary point, rather than extreme applications such as trying to avoid sleep altogether, since even the wise virgins slept.²⁵ In whatever we do, whether eating or drinking, sleeping or waking, we must be prepared for the sudden return of the Lord Jesus "so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming" (1 John 2:28).

²⁰ For evaluation of these interpretations, see Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 965.

²¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 622.

²² "The true preparation and the absence of such preparation lie farther back, in the fact that the one group has oil and the other disregards the oil." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 965.)

²³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:172–73.

²⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 878.

²⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 730.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the transitional phrase “but concerning” (24:36) shift the subject? What question does Jesus here begin to answer (see Matt. 24:3)? How would you contrast what Jesus said about “these things” concerning the destruction of the temple, as opposed to “that day and hour” concerning his final return at the end? What does Jesus mean when he says that even the “Son” does not know when he will return?
2. What does Jesus warn about in 24:37–39? What were the people doing in Noah’s day? How might that correlate to the pursuit of pleasure in today’s world? What role does the pursuit of pleasure play in your own life? What does Jesus warn about in 24:40–44? How do you think that work might distract us from eternal concerns, so that we are unprepared for his coming? What role does your work and your career play in your own life?
3. What does Jesus warn about in 24:45–51? How does this apply to the work of pastors and other leaders in the church? How does this apply to the areas of stewardship over which God has set you in life? How are you tempted to misuse and to abuse what God has entrusted for your stewardship for your own pleasure and comfort? What is one area where you need to repent in any of these errors that Jesus has discussed in 24:37–51?
4. What error do the foolish virgins make in Jesus’ parable in 25:1–13? What do you think that the oil in this parable represents? Are you prepared with that kind of oil in your life? How might we be in danger of being lulled to sleep when we are not actually prepared for Christ’s return? Are you vigilant when you encounter the ordinary means of grace (Word, prayer, and sacraments) to prepare for Christ’s return? If so, how might you get prepared today?