

January 4, 2009

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew
SERMON: *No One Knows the Day or the Hour*
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 24:36-51
SPEAKER: Pastor Dick High

Introduction:

During my preparation for today's message one of the website articles I found has this initial caption: "Might Jesus Christ Return On: Saturday, May 14, 2011 at 9:32 AM EST?" That caption was followed by a pastel painting entitled "The Second Coming of Christ," an interesting visualization of what that event might look like.

Right below this painting was the following note or disclaimer: "We are reminded in scripture that no one can know for sure the exact date of the Lord's return, so I do not put this out as a prediction or a certainty, but only as a possibility or hypotheses." That statement is followed immediately by a quote from Matthew 24:36.

That is the beginning verse in the passage of Scripture that is the text for today's sermon. Please open your Bible to that chapter. For the purpose of context I will initially read the first three verses of Matthew 24 and then we'll read from verse 36 through the end of the chapter. When we come to verse 36 you will see why, with such a specific suggestion of the timing of Christ's return it was appropriate to include the disclaimer.

Matthew 24 *1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 2 "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." 3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing (about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. 42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. 45 "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46 It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. 47 I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48 But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' 49 and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 50 The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. 51 He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In this passage we return to our study of the Gospel of Matthew. Our focus here is, in part, an answer to the first of the disciples' two questions stated in verse 3: When is Christ's Second Coming going to take place? It is both our privilege and challenge today to seek understanding of Christ's answer to that question. But beyond understanding it is also important that we pursue a meaningful personal application of the subject matters addressed.

Two Primary Subjects

The two primary subjects that are in focus today are 1), the second coming of Christ; and 2), the appropriate watchfulness for that event which a believer is to nurture and demonstrate in their life.

In regards to the first subject, the second coming of Christ, Scripture records various straightforward statements of this promise beyond this discussion in Matthew 24. Some are from the lips of Christ Himself, one is given by angels. The response to this promise that is voiced in the next to last verse in all of Scripture is; “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” I find those words compelling and suggest them as an appropriate response throughout today’s sermon, whether verbally or silently affirmed.

So when is Christ coming? That question, voiced by the disciples in verse 3, has already been answered, in part, by Pastor Mike in previous sermons. The context of his answer dealt with the “when” of Christ’s second coming in relation to the seven year period of tribulation – that future time in history also known as Daniel’s 70th week. There are four different answers to that aspect of “when” which are offered within evangelical circles. They are pre-trib (that Christ will come again before the tribulation begins), mid-trib (approximately 3 ½ years into the tribulation period), pre-wrath (sometime after the mid-point of the tribulation), and post-trib (at or near the conclusion of the tribulation). It is not my intent to revisit that discussion this morning. Regardless of your understanding or belief about these scenarios as the answer to the question of “when,” there is a broader question and a different, although not conflicting, answer that is our focus today. We’ll look at that shortly.

The second primary subject of our focus today is the command which Christ gives to us as believers to be expectant of and watchful for His second coming. As we move through the passage we’ll note two such commands in verses 42 and 44. These commands are echoed elsewhere in Scripture from the Gospels to Revelation.

Let’s begin now to actually walk through the text.

Walking Through the Text

No One Knows – Verse 36

It is helpful to me to draw a mental line from verse 3 to verse 36. In answer to the question asked in verse 3 regarding when Christ will return Jesus states in verse 36 that “no one knows about that day or hour...” If we envision a circle and ask who would be within the circle of knowing about the day and hour of Christ’s return, the answer is “no one!” That is true of us, that is true of people throughout the world, that is true of the angels in heaven, and it is true of Christ Himself. The only one that is within this circle of knowledge is God the Father!

I realize the statement in verse 36 is troubling to some, as it raises questions about Christ’s omniscience. Many understand that statement as limited to His time on earth when Scripture tell us He “emptied Himself.” The statement is so clear and emphatic I’m not convinced of that explanation. My perspective is that this statement indicates an accepted absence of knowing and the demonstration of an implicit faith/trust in and dependence upon the Father *about that day or hour*. I consider that as an example for us to emulate.

The subject of “knowing,” or more specifically “not knowing” is continued in verses 37ff. There we are introduced to a comparison; between the days of Noah and the time at the coming of the Son of Man. The phrase that I want to focus on specifically is in verse 39, *and they knew nothing about what would happen...*

Many Knew Nothing – Verses 37-41

The passage in Scripture that forms the background to these words is Genesis 6. In examining that passage you are led to determine that the reference to “knowing nothing” is certainly not true about Noah. God speaks to Noah about the corruption and violence that He sees throughout the earth. He tells Noah that He (God) will bring about destruction of both people and the earth. Further, Noah is given instruction to build an ark and that God will bring a great flood upon the earth. There are additional instructions that you can note as you read through the passage. The question that I wish to ask is how long did it take Noah to build the ark? The answer is that we are never specifically told. Some suggest that the project could have taken up to 90 years! Even at a much shorter time period, the physical presence of this sizeable building project begs the question of what Christ means in Matthew 24:39 when He states that *they knew nothing about what would happen...*

II Peter 2:5 refers to Noah as a preacher of righteousness. So in addition to the visible construction of the ark Noah spoke at some time, in some fashion about the righteousness of God, and likely of His coming judgment. So again, what is meant by the phrase *they knew nothing about what would happen...?*

Early in Genesis 6 (verse 3) God states, *My Spirit will not contend with man forever...* Taking into account other Scriptures that state that the natural man, that is anyone who has not received Christ as personal savior, does not understand the things of the God, and that as people perpetually resist the work of God and His Spirit in their lives God releases them (the repeated phrase is Romans 1 is that *God gave them over*) to further degradation is it possible that the ignorance of which Christ speaks in Matthew 24:39 is what I would call a chosen ignorance? There was no interest in, belief in, or concern about the things of God in the slightest degree. People went about their life of entrenched sinfulness oblivious to both the ark’s construction and Noah’s preaching; a very real spiritual blindness!

One final comment from Genesis 6: It does appear that there is one thing that Noah did not know; when he was to enter the ark. (In that sense he did not know the day or hour.) In communication with Noah God ultimately tells him when to do that, along with giving a seven day advance notice of when the flood will begin.

From this background what I read in Matthew 24 speaks of what I would call an “apparent suddenness.” It is the chosen obliviousness toward and disinterest and disbelief in the things of God that leads to the apparent suddenness of the flood taking people away. I believe that is the appropriate understanding of the phrase and they knew nothing about what would happen... So too with Christ’s second coming; it will occur with the same apparent suddenness. That appears to be the primary point of the two illustrations in verses 40 and 41.

Although I have not read, I am familiar with the book series Left Behind. While I personally believe in the rapture of the church before the tribulation, I think these two verses which speak of individuals being left behind is not the strongest support for that position. The immediately preceding verse speaks of people being taken with suddenness in judgment! The “them” referred to in verse 39 who were all taken away were all those alive at the time of the flood (excluding Noah and his family). It is thus a complete reversal of perspective to in the very next verse consider those who are spoken of as being taken away as believers. One of the foundations upon which that complete reversal in perspective is said to be viable is the fact that the verb “take” in verses 40 and 41 is different from the verb “take” in verse 39. Granting that reality, while the verb from verses 40 and 41 is used in John 14:3 when Jesus says, *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me...* and thus is viewed as supportive of that difference, it is to be noted that this same verb is also used to describe the arrest of Christ, when he was taken away to judgment (Matthew 27:27).

Let's pause for just a brief time here to put together a summary of thoughts.

- There are clear and definitive statements in Scripture promising the return of Christ.
- When will that occur? A part of the answer is that only God knows the precise time *about that day or hour*. Another aspect of the answer is that His return will occur in relationship to a very tumultuous time, such as described in the earlier verses of Matthew 24.
- While only God knows *about that day or hour*, the believer is in a position through the revelation of Scripture to know of the fact of Christ's return, of implications of His return, and at least some indicators of the overall timing of that return. Thus we need to keep in balance both aspects of "not knowing" and "knowing." That balance is conveyed in such passages as I Thessalonians 5:4 which states; *But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.*
- When Christ's second coming does occur it will be for many a completely unanticipated or sudden event. For the unbeliever that will be due to a (chosen) blindness of heart: As it was in the days of Noah...

In light of these truths, what is the application for the believer? That begins to unfold in verse 42.

The Necessity to "Keep Watch" – Verses 42-44

Scattered throughout the New Testament are various verses where we are encouraged and exhorted to be watchful. (Matthew 26:41) *Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.* (I Peter 5:8) *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* (Acts 20:31) *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.* (Ephesians 6:18) *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.* (Mark 14:34) *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."*

The context for this command in Matthew 24 is the necessity of being watchful in the knowledge and anticipation of Christ's return. That command is specifically tied to the fact that we *do not know on what day our Lord will come*. There are ultimately some unknown aspects about the timing of His return that not only should caution us against dogmatism, but should also be the foundation for a continual watchfulness. That is the flow of thought that I observe in verses 42-44.

We are to *keep watch*, a term which conveys aspects of diligence and vigilance. We are to keep watch because we do not know on *what day your Lord will come*. That is the point that is clearly emphasized in the remaining verses of Matthew 24. If we did know when something of significance was to occur (the example Christ cites here - having our house broken into) we would be able to target our watchfulness to a specific time-frame. But even though we are not in darkness, even though we have the Spirit of God alive and active in our life, and even though we have significant teaching in Scripture about the return of Christ, we *must be ready* (verse 44) *because the Son of Man will come at one hour when you do not expect him*. The term *ready* speaks of preparation, being resolute in one's thinking and actions.

In explaining the concept of "readiness" I find the following from the Kittel Theological Dictionary of the New Testament very instructive. "In the New Testament readiness is demanded in three respects: readiness for good works; readiness to bear witness to the Gospel; and readiness for the return of the Lord. This last requirement Jesus put to His disciples with particular urgency. In virtue of it the life of Christians becomes a life of conscious and vigilant expectation... This readiness gives the Christian life a distinctive dynamic character." (Kittel, Vol II, pg. 706)

Look again at that last sentence. This readiness (for the return of the Lord) gives the Christian life a distinctive dynamic character. I read it again because that statement challenges me to consider if there is a distinctive dynamic character to my life as a believer rooted in my response to Christ's urging and command to keep watch and be ready for His return?

One's response to this command of Christ will either demonstrate faithfulness and wisdom, or wickedness and foolish thinking.

The Importance of Faithfulness and Wisdom – Verses 45-51

If we live each day honoring God through being people of integrity in our relationships with others, in using our abilities, finances, and spiritual gifts to serve the Lord, in making choices of obedience to God and His Word throughout the day, in humbly serving others, in demonstrating compassion and care to those within our sphere of influence and in situations of needs, and in sharing our faith, we demonstrate an anticipation of and a readiness for the Lord's return. Daily faithfulness in one's relationship with Christ is a significant testimony of one's readiness for Christ's return. I believe that is the person spoken about in verses 45-47, the one that Christ states is faithful and wise.

The flip side of that is when someone responds to the delay in Christ's return with both an attitude toward and actions of neglect to the life choices that demonstrated a life-changing relationship with Christ. When that occurs the consequences are severe. In fact, I believe what is addressed in the final four verses of Matthew 24 indicates that there are individuals within the church, who ultimately are not believers in Christ. They may look like they are, they may even act like they are. They may even at this point in time think that they are (recall Heather Fredrickson's testimony from two weeks ago). But in reality, there is an absence of a personal relationship with Christ. Thus, because there is no indwelling of the Holy Spirit, there is no basis for that "distinctive dynamic character" to develop. By not demonstrating a perpetual watchfulness they ultimately give evidence of being like those in the days of Noah who went about life (eating and drinking – verse 49; cf. verse 39) with no expectation or awareness of coming judgment.

With those sobering words the chapter concludes!

Certainly we could legitimately spend a great deal more time in examination of this passage. But it is time that we conclude. I want to do so by briefly offering some personal application.

Practical Implementation

First, I want to encourage us to praise God that He keeps every promise He makes!

Such praise is appropriate regarding every promise in Scripture, but of course, our specific focus here is an attitude of praise and thankfulness that Jesus Christ will come again. And when He comes it will be with power and great glory. The veiling of the incarnation will not be repeated. In all His fullness and splendor He will come as King of Kings and Lord of Lords! The repeated prayer of Matthew 6 that God's Kingdom come will be reality. The trials and temptations of our life as believers will be over. What is now seen through a glass darkly will then be crystal clear; face to face.

For all of those reasons and many more we should regularly echo those words near the conclusion of Revelation 22, *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus*. Please turn to those words in your Bible.

Second, I want to encourage us to establish means by which to maintain appropriate vigilance.

I think that will involve choosing to purposely return to this passage and others in the Scriptures that speak to us about the return of Christ so that we keep it as a prominent thought in our mind (Matthew 25:1ff – our passage for next Sunday’s sermon). I think it will also involve a mutual encouragement when we are together with other believers, because the reality is we can all become ensnared in the flow of life and lose our focus on the certain promise of Christ’s return (I Thessalonians 5:11). And certainly prayer is a means of maintaining vigilance, a time when we can ask God’s help in being watchful and ready (Ephesians 6:18), as well as praying for one another in this regard. Finally, the importance of just making a renewed commitment to daily obey our Lord Jesus Christ as a viable means of being His faithful servant.

I want to read two portions of Scripture as we close, because I think they give good summaries of what it means to daily be watchful and ready, committed to a continual obedience to Christ.

II Corinthians 5:9 – So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

Titus 2:11-14 – For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.