

Dr. David Turner, Matthew

Lecture 11A – Matthew 24:32-25:46: The Eschatological Discourse

Greetings. This is David Turner. Welcome to Lecture 11a, our second lecture on the Olivet Discourse, where we pick up with 24:32 and move on to the end of the discourse at the end of Chapter 25.

Our last lecture concluded rather abruptly with some discussion about whether the Preterists or Futurists have it right when it comes to 24:29 to 31. It would appear to me that the Futurists get the better of the Preterists there, but there are some fine scholars who take the Preterist view, but frankly, I've never quite been able to get that passage. Now we move from what will be perhaps called the predictive aspect of the Olivet Discourse to the paranetic or exhortation aspect of it, as we begin a discussion of what we might call the parabolic language about the fig tree in 24:32 through 35.

First to expound this passage, at this point, Jesus moves from speaking predictively to speaking paranetically or practically. From this point on, his goal is not to provide additional information to answer the disciples' question in 24:3, but to exhort them on the proper response to the information that he has given them. This may not be what the disciples want to know, but it's what they need to know.

Matthew 24:32 to 35 parabolically expresses the nearness of the coming of Christ. Jesus' contemporaries are familiar with the process by which the fig tree in the spring buds, blossoms, and eventually in the summer bears fruit, 24:32. So he compares his coming to that process in 24:33. The signs about which the disciples asked in 24:3 are signified by the budding of the tree in the spring, and his coming is signified by the summer when the fruit was born. When the disciples see the signs of spring, they know that summer is coming near.

The certainty of these things is underlined by 24:34 and 35, which affirm that Jesus' contemporaries will observe these signs and that Jesus' words are eternally trustworthy. In days of relative peace and prosperity like we have now, it's difficult to take these words of Jesus to heart. One may become so occupied with the details of everyday living and enjoying the fruits of one's labors that one forgets that it all may end abruptly, 24:37 to 42.

The skepticism of unbelievers compounds the problem by influencing disciples of Jesus to doubt His words, 2 Peter 3:3. But genuine followers of Jesus dare not become too comfortable with the status quo because it will surely, if not speedily, give way to the kingdom of heaven's coming to earth. Now, looking at the passage

theologically, there are two crucial terms in these verses that must be explained. First, what did Jesus mean by the expression, all these things, in 24:33 and 34? This expression refers to the preliminary signs which anticipate the coming of Jesus, not the coming itself.

This is clear from the parabolic imagery used by Jesus. If all these things included the coming of Jesus, 24:33 would be saying, when you see the coming of Jesus, you will know that He is near. But this would be a tautology, an obvious statement that would not need to be made.

Jesus would not so belabor the obvious and say something that goes without saying. On the other hand, if the phrase, all these things, refers merely to the preliminary signs, then the statement makes sense since viewing the signs confirms that the coming is near. The second crucial term in these verses is this generation.

Although there are some futurist scholars who argue that the word generation refers either to the nation of Israel as a whole, or to the eschatological generation which is alive at Jesus' return, notice as expositors like Toussaint and Walvoord in their commentaries take this view, Matthew's use of the term clearly shows that Jesus was talking about his contemporaries. Get out your concordance, check out the term this generation. I think you have to come to that conclusion.

Scholars who argue otherwise opt for an understanding of this generation, which is contrary to Matthew's clear usage, because they wish to protect Jesus from affirming that his coming will occur during the lives of his contemporaries. But if Jesus was speaking only of the preliminary signs which augur his coming, he did not err. As argued in the previous moments, the term, all these things, refers only to the signs, not the coming itself, and Jesus predicts that his contemporaries will see those signs, which include the 70 C.E. destruction of the temple by the Romans.

Now let's move on to the necessity of alertness, which is expressed parabolically and exhortationally in 24:36-51. In 24:36-51, Jesus continues the parabolic and paranetic emphasis by which he began his discourse in 24:32. This passage has three parts, the first stressing that the time of Jesus' return is unknowable in 24:36-42, the second that disciples must be ready for an unexpected appearance of Jesus in 24:43-44, and the third arguing that disciples must faithfully obey their master until he returns in 24:45-51.

The first part draws an analogy between the days of Noah and the last days. Compare 2 Peter 3 verses 3-7. It warns against a preoccupation with daily life, which does not take imminent divine judgment into account.

Instead, alertness is necessary, 24:42. The second part speaks parabolically of a homeowner who does not know that his home is about to be burgled. The disciples

are implicitly told not to emulate the homeowner but to be prepared for the unexpected return of Jesus, 24:44.

The third part continues the parabolic imagery, in which the master of the household entrusts his slave with a duty to perform during his absence. Two hypothetical scenarios are laid out, the first involving a good slave who is rewarded for his faithfulness, 24:47, the second an evil slave whose profligate behavior warrants the master's wrath in 24:50-51. This imagery warns disciples not to deceive themselves into a sinful lifestyle with the notion that Jesus will not return for a long time.

All three parts of the passage stress the necessity of Jesus' followers being alert, prepared, and busy with their master's business until his return. Matthew 25 will continue this parabolic and paranetic emphasis. The clear teaching that Jesus' return will be unexpected exposes the folly of those whose eschatological alertness rises and falls with the latest news from around the world.

There are those dispensed sensationalists, if I may use that term, whose notion of prophecy leads them into a constant scrutiny of world events, especially the latest in the Middle East, in a near-frantic search of supposed prophetic fulfillments which signal the end of the world. Those of this ilk evidently are under the impression that thieves attempt to burgle homes when the owners are at home with all the lights and the electronic alarm turned on. Their voices wax and wane in direct proportion to the degree of tension between Israel and the Palestinians.

But according to Jesus, moments of increased world tensions would be less likely to portend Christ's return than moments of relative prosperity and tranquility. Compare 1 Thess 5:1-3. In any event, the disciples of Jesus must constantly be about the master's business, vigilantly awaiting his return.

The correctness of one's eschatology is ultimately a matter of one's ethics, not of one's ability to speculate. Now, in terms of the theology of this passage, first, we look at its Christology. It may be surprising for those who hold to the classic Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and who, as a result, have a high view of Jesus, to learn from this text that he claimed not to know the time of his return to earth.

But this text, as well as its parallel in Mark 13:32, and Jesus' later comment to his disciples in Acts 1:7, all make the common point that the Father alone keeps this detail in his own inscrutable counsel. How this can be in light of the preexistence and deity of Jesus is not easily explained. However, it is clear that the incarnation of Jesus involved the limitation of the use of his divine attributes.

Philippians 2:6 through 8, for example. As a human being, Jesus became hungry and thirsty and tired. Notice such passages as Matthew 4:2 and 21, 18, as well as John 4:6 and 19:28.

Jesus was empowered by the Spirit of God for his ministry and his miracles. 3:16, 4:1, 12:18, and 28. Compare Luke 3:22, 4:1, 14, and 18, Acts 10:38, and John 1:32, and 3:34.

After Jesus' temptation, he was in need of additional ministry from the angels. 4:11 of Matthew compared to Luke 22:43. As Jesus contemplated returning to the Father, he asked for the restoration of his glorious pre-incarnate prerogatives in John 17:1 through 5. Evangelical Christians are understandably concerned about this text, but they must listen to its emphasis on the genuine humanity of Jesus, whom Paul affirmed to be the man who was the sole mediator between God and humanity in 1 Timothy 2:1 through 5. As far as the eschatology of this passage is concerned, one detail has come in for extended discussion among evangelicals of a futuristic bent.

This is the language of separation in which one is taken and another left at the coming of Jesus, 24:40-42. Those who hold to the theory of a pre-tribulational rapture of the church distinct from the return of Jesus to the earth after the tribulation, 24:29, debate whether 24:40-42 speaks of the rapture taking believers from the earth and leaving unbelievers. The difficulty in coming to a conclusion on this matter is twofold.

First, Jesus does not speak here in terms that approximate the distinction between a pre-tribulational rapture and a post-tribulational coming to the earth, as Paul arguably does if we compare 1 Thess 4:3-18 with 2 Thess 1:6-10. Second, the language of one being taken and another left is ambiguous. On the analogy of the flood of Noah, those taken were swept away by the flood, and those who were left were protected in the ark, 24:38-39, compare 1341. But the imagery of 24:31 seems to involve the taking or gathering of God's chosen ones, not those about to be judged, notice 3:12 in that regard.

The better part of wisdom on this question is to regard it as an unanswerable diversion from the burden of the passage, which is to stress alertness. Ironically, it's possible in cases like this for exegesis to degenerate into a pedantic quest that distracts the student from the real teaching of the passage. Intellectual debate over the intricacies of a text must not occur at the expense of obedience to its ethical directives.

God forbid that we should get so worried arguing about these details that we're not ready to meet Jesus when he does come. Now, we move along to the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids in 25:1-13. The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids demonstrates for the last time in the discourse that the time of Jesus' return is unknowable. Compare with that 24:3, 36, 39, 42-44, 50, and 25:13. This thesis has been stated propositionally in 24:36 and then illustrated historically from the days of Noah in 24:37-42. It's also been illustrated parabolically from an

unexpected burglar 24:43, a good slave 24:45-47, and an evil slave 24:48-51. As if these previous demonstrations of the point were not enough, the present parable illustrates it from yet another familiar area, wedding customs.

Expecting the immediate arrival of the groom to begin the wedding feast, five of the bridesmaids foolishly did not prepare for nightfall by bringing oil for their lamps, but five others wisely prepared for a delay. The foolishness of the former group resulted in their missing the bridegroom and being banned from the wedding feast, but the wise preparations of the latter group led to their sharing in the joy of the wedding. The interpretation of this parable has been unnecessarily complicated by excessive allegorizing.

It's no doubt true that wedding feasts and lamps are used metaphorically elsewhere in Scripture. Look at Revelation 1:12 and 13, Revelation 19:7 and 9. Jesus himself indicates that the features of certain parables have detailed correspondences with reality, such as the parable of the sower in 13:18-23, the parable of the weeds and the wheat in 37-43 of chapter 13, and the parable of the dragnet in 13:49-50. But in the case of the present parable, Jesus supplies only a generalizing conclusion in 25:13. Jesus does not go into a lot of detail in interpreting this parable. Therefore, it seems clear enough that Jesus is the bridegroom, whose arrival is delayed, and that the wise and foolish bridesmaids symbolize alert and lackadaisical disciples.

The expectation of the bridegroom lends itself perfectly to the point of alert preparedness for the coming of Jesus, but one should not be concerned about whether the rapture of believers or the return of Jesus to earth is in view. Neither should one succumb to the common temptation to identify the oil in the parable with the Holy Spirit, or stress that salvation cannot be transferred from one person to another. Perhaps such speculations are pleasant intellectual exercises, but they divert attention from the ethical imperative found in 25:13, which is to be ready.

Ironically, such theological gamemanship may be equivalent to the activities that diverted Noah's generation from awareness of their imminent judgment. Compare 24:38 and 29. The foolish bridesmaid's lack of prudence is similar to the foolishness of the man who built his house on the sand, portraying one who did not obey the words of Jesus.

Back in 7:24 to 27, a comparison of 24:48 and 25:5 shows that the lesson of this parable is the same as that of the evil slave. In both cases, some delay in the return of Jesus is postulated, but the two reactions to the delay are opposites, and in these opposite reactions, there is a crucial lesson. The evil slave irresponsibly overestimated the delay of the master's return and was unpleasantly surprised by the master's seemingly early arrival.

On the other hand, the foolish bridesmaids frivolously underestimated the delay in the bridegroom's arrival and did not prepare for the time. The evil slave's lackadaisical approach to the master's return is similar to the generation of Noah and the homeowner, neither of whom expected a problem, 24:36 to 44. Neither was alert and ready.

But the foolish bridesmaids took readiness to the extreme in not planning for any delay. They are not prepared to persevere to the end, which is stressed in 10:22, 13:20 and 21, and 24:13. From these opposite errors, the church learns it can assume neither that Jesus will return immediately nor that he will return eventually. The church must expect Jesus constantly, yet at the same time, they must persevere and plan for future ministry in cases that come as delayed.

These two duties must be held in dynamic tension if the church is to be faithful to the teaching of its master. Compare Luke 12:35 and 36. Now we turn to the parable of the three servants, sometimes known as the parable of the talents.

The structure of this parable is completely symmetrical, as you can see from the chart we've provided on page 44 of your supplemental materials. We have three cycles, I guess you could say, in which the five, two, and one talent servants are first entrusted with their talents, then they respond in various ways to their reception of the talents, and then God, pictured by the master, rewards them for their response to the talents that they received. So, 5:2, 1:5, 2:1, 5:2, and one servant are the same order repeated three times there.

Each of these successive scenes, though, is a little bit longer than the preceding one, so there's sort of a dramatic buildup there, with the most stress at the end placed on the punishment of the wicked slave. So, the structure of this parable is quite interesting. Check that out and look at it a little on your own. If the preceding parables have been about alertness, then this one is about the faithful stewardship that alertness produces.

This time, the issue is not whether the slaves will be surprised by the master's return, but whether they will be dependable in the use of his resources. His gifts lead to their tasks. A key detail of this parable is that the master entrusted his resources to the slaves according to their individual abilities 25:15.

The third slave only receives one talent, so the master evidently realizes he has less ability than the two previous slaves. But he ought to have earned something with the talent, and he did not. He's not given five talents, and he's not expected to earn five talents.

But he is not permitted to earn anything at all. Whereas the foolish bridesmaids thought their task was easier than it turned out to be, the lazy slave thought his task was harder than it turned out to be. Blomberg makes that comment.

The point is that if the followers of Jesus are faithful to him during his absence, they will be good stewards of the opportunities and abilities he has entrusted to them. On faithfulness, notice such passages as 12:42, Romans 12:6 and following, 1 Corinthians 4:1 and 2, 7:7, 12:4 and following, Ephesians 4:7 and 8, Titus 1:7, 1 Peter 4:10. Alertness requires effort and active participation in the work of the kingdom. Perhaps the familiar cliché is appropriate here.

Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God. Disciples must not make, as it were, shaky investments with their Lord's resources, but neither can they excuse their laziness with the false excuse that they have incurred no losses. Garland points out well that when Christ returns, he will not ask if one had the date right, but what have you been doing? Now we move on to Matthew 25, verses 31 through 46, often called the parable of the sheep and the goats, but not really a parable, better understood as a parabolic picture, perhaps of the final judgment.

Thus, the final discourse of Jesus, the Olivet Discourse, has its final section as the final judgment. This discourse began with the disciples' question about the coming of Jesus in 24:3, and it ends with his coming to judge all nations in 25:31. But the disciples' question was primarily about the timing of Jesus' coming, and there is no chronology here. This passage deals with the significance of Jesus' coming, not its timing.

It amounts to an exposition of 24:29 to 31. 24:29 to 31 has all of that apocalyptic language and cosmic imagery there. This passage describes things in a much more prosaic or propositional fashion.

Although some view Matthew 25:31 to 46 as a parable, its metaphorical elements in 25:32b and 33 are not extended throughout the whole pericope. One might describe this section as a semi-parable, but it begins and concludes as a prose narrative of the judgment of the nations. The narrative appears to have four parts, which speak of the setting of the judgment in 25:31 to 33, the invitation to the righteous to enter the kingdom in 25:34 to 40, the banishment of the wicked to eternal fire in 25:41 to 45, and the chiastic conclusion in 25:46. We have attempted to lay out this very well symmetrically structured parable for you in two different ways on page 45 of the supplemental material.

Top half of the page, a more simple outline showing the chiastic structure, and the bottom half of the page showing the progress in the symmetrical way in which the king treats both the sheep and the goats, and then the conclusion, which deals first with the goats' destiny and then the sheep's destiny, which shows the basic chiastic

structure of the overall pericope. In general, this final section on the last judgment adds the lesson of compassion to the lessons of alertness in 24:32 to 25:13, and faithfulness in 25:14 to 30. These have already been inculcated as the proper ethical response to the coming of Jesus, and now we have compassion added to it.

So the three things that we have going for us as believers, if we have understood the coming of Jesus, are alertness, faithful service, and compassion to those in need. Apart from those things, it really doesn't matter which type of eschatological theory we hold because we're wrong. Jesus teaches his disciples in Matthew to love all people, even their enemies.

Compare 5:47. But there must be a special love and concern for one's fellow disciples. Itinerant preachers would especially need the type of ministry mentioned in 25:35 and 36. Compare with that 10:40 and 3 John 5-8.

But it's doubtful if itinerant preachers alone are in view here. Jesus is identified with his disciples, and they are identified with him. They are persecuted due to their connection with him.

Notice 5:11, 10:18, 22, and 25, as well as 23:34. We also remember here the words which our Lord asked Saul, who became Paul in Acts chapter 9. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Seeing that Jesus identifies himself so closely with his people. Therefore, it's quite likely that the privation of Jesus' little brothers in 25:35, and 36 is due to their testimony for Jesus. When one shows mercy to a follower of Jesus, in a profound sense, one is showing mercy to Jesus himself.

Now there are indeed many interpretive questions regarding this passage, regarding its overall import and the understanding of some of the details in it.

Dispensationalists argue that the passage speaks not of a general judgment of resurrected mankind, but of the judgment of living nations who are alive on earth at Christ's return. The standard of judgment is their treatment of the Jewish remnant during the tribulation.

See Toussaint and Walvoord and the older dispensational commentaries for this interpretation. No doubt the context and language of the passage can lend themselves to this interpretation, but it's doubtful that Jesus is being as precise as the modern dispensational system of a series of judgments in the end times. A more exegetically oriented issue is the identity of the least of these my brothers and sisters, which literally would be these least of my brothers.

Some take the nations assembled for this judgment as those who have never heard the gospel and who are judged on the basis of the light they had. But Jesus himself seems to discount this wishful thinking in 11:27. Those inclined to a socially oriented gospel see the passage as stressing the need for mercy to anyone in need.

Barclay in the Daily Study Bible, Baer's commentary, and Davies and Allison all take that view. One would acknowledge here the unbelievably sacrificial life of Mother Teresa, who frequently cited this passage along these lines. No doubt, Jesus' disciples should perform deeds of mercy to those in need.

That's not in doubt. See 9:13, and 12:7. But it is doubtful that Jesus' little brothers here are to be identified with the needy in general. The dispensationalist view that the passage speaks of the treatment of the Jewish remnant by the Gentiles during the eschatological tribulation probably interprets the passage too narrowly.

But it correctly understands the relationship between belief in Jesus and deeds of mercy to others. But all these views seem to miss or minimize the fact that in Matthew, the little ones are indeed the true family of Jesus. Compare 10:40 to 42.

And 12:46 to 50. Also, they seem to miss or minimize the fact that Jesus' brothers are related to him spiritually. 5:22 to 24.

And verse 47. Chapter 7, verses 3 to 5:12, 48 to 50. 18:15, 21, and 35.

23:8. 28:10. All these passages point out that the true family of Jesus is those who believe in him. Therefore, one dare not cause the spiritual ruin of these little ones.

18:6. And one must genuinely forgive if one of them sins against the other. 18:21, and 35. In Jesus' community, the world's lust for status and prestige is out of place, since all the disciples of Jesus are brothers and, if you will, sisters in the same family.

20:20 to 28. And 23:8 to 10. Therefore, it seems like it's clear in Matthew that the little brothers of Jesus are Christians, perhaps preachers of the gospel who receive mercy as the standard of judgment here.

This passage also speaks to the awesome issue of the doctrine of eternal punishment. Although it seems that the doctrine of the annihilation of the lost is growing in popularity, the juxtaposition of eternal life and eternal punishment in 25:46 renders such a notion as theological wishful thinking. Matthew's descriptions of the destiny of the lost speak at times of fire.

Check out 3:12, 13, 40, and 50. 18:8, and 9. 25:41, and 46. And compare with that 2 Thess 1:8, 2 Peter 3:7, and Jude 7. Also Revelation 14:10, 19:20, 20:10, 20:14, and 15, and 21:8. At other times, the destiny of the lost is spoken of as deep darkness.

Look at 8:12, 22:13, 25:30, and compare 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6, and Jude 13. The dreadful horror of everlasting separation from God is vividly expressed by both these metaphors. Now, quickly to the summary and transition.

The difficulties in interpreting Matthew 24 and 25 serve to remind Christians of their limitations as finite human beings. When Bible teachers of equal scholarship and devotion cannot agree on the particulars of a passage, one should shy away from dogmatism and keep an open mind toward further instruction. Matthew 24, 25 clearly shows that biblical prophecy is not mere prognostication or soothsaying.

Only 24:4 to 31 directly responds to the disciples' question about the future, and even the futuristic section stresses the need for ethical obedience. There is a stress on eschatology in each of Jesus' first four discourses, so it's not surprising that Jesus ends all his teaching in Matthew with eschatology. When Jesus concludes all his words, he has concluded the teaching which he commands his disciples to perpetuate and inculcate in his fellow followers from all the nations of the earth.

With this magnificent body of teaching now concluded, events will move quickly toward his being handed over to be crucified in 26:2. He will give his life as a ransom for many to save his people from their sins and to inaugurate the new covenant in his blood.