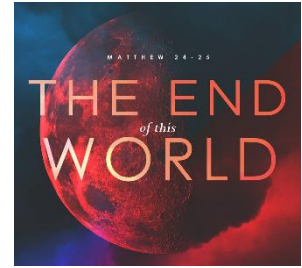


# Ready

Matthew 24:36 to 25:13

March 15, 2020



*Please read Matthew 24:36-44 before going further in this manuscript.*

Last week we began a sermon series on “The End of This World.” It’s based on Jesus’ Olivet Discourse from Matthew 24-25. Last week our focus was on “Signs.” We talked about our human tendency to allow signs to confuse us or panic us. But as we carefully considered Jesus’ words, it became clear that “Signs of the End of This World” are meant to warn us and to encourage us, to motivate us to godly living. Today, we’re going to consider Jesus’ words about being **READY** for His return. Are you good at being ready for things? Are you the kind of person who shows up early, on time, or late? OR, are you the kind of person who asks, “show up for what?” If you are one of those people who is always running late for things, please don’t let this sermon stress you out. That’s not the kind of readiness that Jesus is talking about. Today’s passage focuses on being ready for Christ’s return. Please turn in your Bible to Matthew 24:36. Today we’re going to consider 3 reasons why we should always be ready for Jesus’ return. First of all, **We should always be ready because:**

**1. We can’t know WHEN Jesus will return.** In Matthew 24:36, Jesus says, “But about that day or hour **no one knows**, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” NO ONE knows. The angels don’t know. Jesus didn’t even know!<sup>1</sup> There are a lot of things about the End Times that are worth discussing and debating, but predicting exactly WHEN Jesus will return, shouldn’t be one of them. Could Jesus have said it any more plainly? “NO ONE knows.” And yet, we humans still can’t seem to leave this one alone. Does the date December 21, 2012 ring a bell? Supposedly, the stars aligned and the Maya calendar was used to predict “The End of This World.” We’re still here, of course, but I’m sure we’ll keep hearing predictions like this in the years to come. We can only hope that more and more of us will learn NOT to be duped by these end-of-the-world predictions. Any attempt to predict the date of Christ’s return is at best foolish or arrogant. At worst, it’s harmful, even sinful (because it’s a lie, it’s false teaching). Unfortunately, many false prophets have tried and failed to predict the exact date of Christ’s return. They only end up embarrassing themselves and discouraging the faith of others. We do well to avoid any such speculation in the future. In HUMILITY, we should hold loosely to our own ability to read and predict the signs of Christ’s return.<sup>2</sup>



It’s natural for us to wonder, “when will Jesus return?” In fact, right before Jesus ascended into heaven, His 1<sup>st</sup> followers were still asking about the timing of the End Times. In Acts 1:6-7 they ask, “...Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: **‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.’**<sup>3</sup> Anyone who has taken young children on a long road trip can understand this constant questioning: “Are we there yet? Are we there yet? How much longer!?” We can either respond by saying something like, “not far now kids.” Or, we can be a little more biblical with them, “It’s not for you to know the times or dates your father/mother has set!” Or “NO ONE knows that day or hour.”

Let’s be clear about this though, it’s not just that we DON’T know, it’s that we CAN’T know. We aren’t supposed to know. If God wanted us to know, then He would have told us. Therefore, as we mature in our Christian faith, we come to understand that we just need to trust God on this one. In fact, it’s probably better that we don’t know. In other words, an exact outline of the End Times events, could actually be a significant hindrance to our relationship with God.<sup>4</sup> It can be a little bit like

<sup>1</sup> At least while He was still on the earth. Consider Philippians 2:6-8.

<sup>2</sup> Consider Matthew 24:15.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answer to the disciples’ questions in Matthew 24:3, was simply verse 36, “no one knows.” D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 551.

<sup>4</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1683, footnote on Mark 13:32.

the dangers of a college syllabus. You get your syllabus at the beginning of the semester, and it assures you that your big assignment isn't due until the end of next month. The danger is that we might say to ourselves, "Well then, I guess I don't need to worry about that one for a while!" But God doesn't want us putting off our relationship with Him until later. He wants a daily relationship with us right now. He isn't interested in having us procrastinate and get around to our faith later. If we are betting on the long game, that there is still plenty of time to get around to spiritual things, then we need to think again.

You might say, "But Pastor Jerry, aren't there certain things that need to happen BEFORE Jesus' returns? Don't we actually have a little more time? Aren't there some clues that we can watch for, before Jesus will return?" For example, some scholars look back to Matthew 24:15, and believe that we are still waiting for "the abomination that causes desolation" to be set up in the holy place. They would say that until that prediction is fulfilled, we still have a little more time. Other scholars would say, "the Lord won't return until AFTER the Great Tribulation kicks into full gear." What I'm driving at here, is that our particular convictions about the Ends Times, can cause us to lose our sense of urgency. Our perspective on Jesus' imminent return can be swayed, by whether we believe that Christ-followers will be raptured out before the Tribulation, or taken halfway through it, or will remain until the very end of the tribulation.

Rather than getting caught up in this debate, I urge you to pay attention to Jesus' MAJOR point here in verses 42 & 44: KEEP WATCH & ALWAYS BE READY for the Lord's return. In other words, since the coming of Christ will come at a time known only to God, it demands constant expectancy.<sup>5</sup> If you skim back over vv. 36-44, it becomes clear that it is unwise for us, to play "clock management" games with the End Times. Don't take the risk of trying to gauge just the right moment to get serious about your walk with God. Don't think that you can go a little while longer living your own way, because you've probably still got lots of time left. We need to KEEP WATCH & BE READY, even today, because "we can't know when Jesus will return." Last week I recommended a paper titled, "Has the 'Prophecy Bug' Bitten You?" Let me recommend that to you again. There is a link to it on our website.<sup>6</sup> A 2<sup>nd</sup> reason why we should always be ready is because:

**2. Jesus will return expecting faithful and wise behavior.** As we consider being ready for Jesus' return, we might say to ourselves: "Well, I'm good to go, I'm ready. I placed my faith in Jesus' death and resurrection a long time ago. My salvation is locked in and I'm ready." That's good. Actually, that's excellent. Each one of us does need to make our own personal decision to trust Christ for salvation. But being ready may involve something more...<sup>7</sup> You see, the question isn't, "have you decided to trust Jesus for your salvation?" The question is, "are you ready for Jesus' return?" This involves more than just a 1-time decision to follow Jesus. Maybe you are thinking, "What are you driving at Pastor Jerry? What's your point? Are you saying that we need something MORE THAN SALVATION in order to go to heaven?" NO, I am NOT saying that. What I am saying, is that we need to listen to Jesus. When Jesus talks about keeping watch and being ready for His return, he talks about being a "faithful and wise servant." Jesus asks the question in Matthew 24:45-51, "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? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 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. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This passage begs the question: What does our Christian Faith look like "when nobody's watching"? When there's no immediate accountability? In our culture sometimes you'll hear someone say, "dance like nobody's watching." This is actually pretty good advice. Once and a while we need to

<sup>5</sup> See the EFCA 10-point Statement of Faith, Article #9. <https://www.efca.org/resources/document/efca-statement-faith>

<sup>6</sup> <https://efcbemidji.org/article/has-the-prophecy-bug-bitten-you/>

<sup>7</sup> Consider 2 Peter 3, especially verses 10-11. We should live holy and godly lives as we look forward to Jesus' return.

let our hair down and relax. We need to let loose a little in the privacy of our own home. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. Sometimes, "when nobody's watching," our true colors shine through and they reveal our struggle with wickedness. As Christ-followers, we need to be careful not to let our faith become hypocritical "when no one is watching." We need to be careful that we don't allow wicked thoughts to creep into our minds while "Jesus is staying away a loooooong time." (Matthew 24:48) We need to check ourselves for hypocrisy; we can't allow our behavior to become selfish and sinful. We can't take our faith for granted, and begin abusing our power over others or fall into gluttony and drunkenness. Because if we do, and if our Master returns, and finds us living sinful lives rather than godly lives, He will strictly judge us for our hypocrisy. That's what verse 51 is getting at: judgement. "He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Verse 51 is a description of hell.<sup>8</sup> Jesus is giving us a compelling warning against hypocritical faith. We should always be ready for Jesus' return, because when He comes back, He will be expecting faithful and wise behavior from His followers.<sup>9</sup> A 3<sup>rd</sup> reason why we should always be ready is because:

**3. Jesus will only return for those who genuinely know Him.** This is probably the most important, of all three points in the sermon this morning. Especially after we just talked about right BEHAVIOR, we can't afford to miss Jesus focus on right RELATIONSHIP. Let's work our way through the Parable of the 10 Virgins together, keeping this idea of right RELATIONSHIP in mind. Matthew 25:1 begins, "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom." This familiar phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven will be like" signals that Jesus is telling us yet another parable. The opening phrase "at that time" reminds us that we are still talking about Jesus' return. So, the bridegroom in this parable refers to Jesus. The virgins represent those who have been invited to the wedding and are waiting for the bridegroom to return, so that the celebration can begin. The context for this parable, is that it is taking longer than expected, for Jesus to return.<sup>10</sup> You see, these lamps had to be refilled with oil about every 15 minutes or so.<sup>11</sup>

Matthew 25:2-5 goes on to explain, "Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep." The need for sleep mentioned here, is simply due to the passing of time. It took a while for the bridegroom to return, so they all grew tired and needed some sleep.

Matthew 25:6-10 then goes on, "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut." In other words, Jesus returned, the wedding banquet began, and the door was shut.

At this point in the parable, some of us might ask, "Why were the wise virgins so stingy? Why couldn't they just share their oil with the others?" But the point of this parable isn't to teach us about stinginess or generosity; this parable is trying to teach us about PERSONAL readiness. The emphasis here is that each one of us has a personal responsibility to be ready for Jesus' return. No matter how badly we might want to, we can't share or transfer our own spiritual readiness to someone else.<sup>12</sup> (To put it another way, we can't share our oil with others.) At the end of the Parable of the Ten Virgins, there is a powerful crescendo. Some of them weren't ready. They had to run out and buy

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<sup>8</sup> See similar references in Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; and 25:30.

<sup>9</sup> Lately, we are hearing more and more about stress test for banks. The idea is to check and see if each financial institution has enough margin to stay healthy if the market drops out or if things in our world become unstable. When a bank passes a stress test, it means that it has enough integrity and stability to endure an economic downturn. Wise and faithful behavior when no one is watching can be a kind of stress test for Christians. Genuine faith will last, it will endure over a long time with faithful and wise behavior, even if Jesus' return ends up taking a long, long time to get here.

<sup>10</sup> See discussion by D.A. Carson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., #9, Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 575.

<sup>11</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1635, footnote on Matthew 25:9.

<sup>12</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1635, footnote on Matthew 25:9. It's been said, "God has no grandchildren."

more oil. But by the time they got back, all that they could do is make an emotional appeal. Verse 11 says that, "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'" You see, they weren't ready when they needed to be. They hadn't properly prepared. Now the door was shut and they could no longer get in. The Lord does answer them, but His reply wasn't "you guys are late!" This parable isn't about God being a stickler for time management skills. Look at the Lord's reply in Matthew 25:12, "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, **I don't know you.**'" He doesn't say that they're late, He says that He doesn't KNOW them.

You see the main focus here isn't on right BEHAVIOR, it's on right RELATIONSHIP. This parable is about having our own right RELATIONSHIP with the Lord. The fact is, that some of these virgins, didn't KNOW the bridegroom. If they had known Him, then he would have known them.<sup>13</sup> And, they would have been eager for His return. They would have made sure that they were READY for it. As we are "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together," we need to sustain a faithful relationship with the Lord. We can't just be strong starters who lack endurance, nor can we try to wait right up until the last minute and then sneak our way in.<sup>14</sup> We need to eagerly anticipate His return, as more precious to us than anything else that this world has to offer us. Brother or Sister in Christ, we need to be READY, at any time, for Jesus to return!

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji to a mostly livestreamed audience on March 15, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

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<sup>13</sup> Consider John 10:27.

<sup>14</sup> I used to work out with guys like this in track. They'd either run hard the 1st mile and then drop out. Or, they would lag way behind the whole time, then speed up right at the end where the coach was watching and act like they were sincerely trying the whole time.