

Return of the King

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[0 : 00] Well, our Bible reader, Gemma, she deserves an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. Well done, Gemma. Yes. No time for speeches now.

This is a very long passage. But if at least you remember that we're in Matthew's Gospel, that's a good start. And you'll remember that in the beginning of Chapter 24, which Aaron preached on last week, that Jesus left behind the temple.

And that wasn't just a geography marker. It was actually, it was a symbolic action. It represented Jesus turning his back on the religious leaders and their hypocrisy.

And he began teaching his disciples his fifth and final long teaching discourse at the beginning of Chapter 24. And what was the topic? The destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus' return, and the final judgment.

And last week, we heard those disciples ask two big questions. The first one was, when will the temple be destroyed? And the second one was, when is your second coming in the end of the age?

[1 : 06] And last week, the first 35 verses of Chapter 24 primarily dealt with that first question. So our passage tonight, it will deal with that second question. When is Jesus coming again?

And what will happen at his return? So here's an outline for the sermon. Number one, Jesus is coming again as judge. Number two, we don't know when.

Three, so be ready. And four, you want to know how to be ready? Jesus teaches us what readiness looks like. Let's start with number one.

Jesus is coming again as judge. So our passage begins mid-conversation there in Verse 36 of Chapter 24. And if you'll have a look with me at page 830, you'll find Jesus speaking with his disciples on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem.

And he says, But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

[2 : 08] And that word coming there in Verse 37 is parousia. And it's Jesus' choice word whenever he wants to talk about his second coming, his return. And this time, the second coming, it's going to be in glory.

Nobody's going to miss it. And the parousia is the subject of that whole last section of our reading, which begins in Verse 31 of Chapter 25. It starts off like this.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne, and before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Do you remember that? And perhaps you're a Christian. And you find the subject of judgment to be a little bit distasteful. I understand.

I don't much like talking about judgment either. But it might surprise you to learn that of the 148 individual stories throughout Matthew's Gospel, that at least 60 of them are either about judgment or refer to judgment.

[3 : 13] And that in the five major sermons that Jesus preaches, all five of them end with what? The subject of judgment. And that these verses are, in Chapter 25, are the last public words that Jesus speaks to his disciples.

And what does he want to talk about? Judgment. Judgment. So whatever you think about the topic, Christians can't simply ignore it if we want to faithfully follow Jesus and take him seriously.

But perhaps you're not a Christian, in which case you probably think that the subject seems a bit intolerant or a bit morose. Why are you guys gathering on a Sunday night to talk about judgment?

But if you're willing to consider for a moment that everything that Jesus predicted in Chapter 24 about what would happen to Jerusalem in AD 70, every single one of those details came true.

If there's a man who can predict the future in that way, the judgment upon Jerusalem, ask yourself, what if this man really is from God?

[4 : 18] And what if his message is meant to be an opportunity of salvation rather than condemnation? What if love is the reason that Jesus loves to talk about judgment so much?

Jesus talks about judgment so much because he longs for each and every one of us to receive the good news of eternal life through his saving work on the cross. And so he's warning us here that to reject God's mercy will lead to an eternity of darkness and separation from God.

In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. That weeping will be tears of regret over lost chances. And that gnashing, that grinding of teeth, it will be anger.

Anger at ourself. Anger at God. Anger at one another. So yes, Jesus does like to talk about judgment because the stakes are very high.

And Jesus is coming again as judge. But secondly, he makes it clear here that we do not know when. One of my favorite, one of my favorite children's stories is the cat in the hat.

[5 : 33] Do you remember the cat in the hat? Do you remember what a big mess the cat makes with the help of thing one and thing two? There's that moment right after the cat has fallen off the beach ball while juggling half of the household possessions.

It's at that exact moment when brother and sister spot mother's high heel coming around the corner towards the front door. And it's at that moment that the cat magically cleans up the whole house and then vanishes and mother finds her children smiling sweetly in a spotless room.

I think many people hope to take a cat in the hat approach to Jesus' return. I'll hear some sort of trumpet or something and then get my house in order and everything will be spick and span when Jesus comes in.

But chapter 24, verse 36 ought to give a second thought here. Concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.

None of us knows when Jesus is coming back. In fact, none of us knows how long we're going to live. There won't be any warning. The choices we make now about how we respond to Jesus' offer of salvation will determine our eternal life or death.

[6 : 52] But how about Jesus himself? How is it that he does not know when he's coming back? Maybe you saw that verse and it's distracting you, it's bothering you. I'll tell you that this verse gives commentators fits.

There's no easy answer here. I just want to make two quick comments. The first is that it seems to be an expression of Jesus' full humanity. You remember in the Gospels that he gets hungry and tired and that he suffers and he bleeds and he dies.

And remember in the crowd he asks, who touched me when the woman reaches out and touches his robe and is healed? As one commentator put it, Jesus fully took on humanity's honorable limits.

And so Jesus' lack of omniscience here, it belongs somehow to his full humanity. And the second comment is just that Jesus, he makes this statement in the context of his relationship between father and son.

And so you notice that he calls himself here not the son of man, not the Messiah, but the son, definite article. It's because he enjoys this unique, this perfect relationship with his heavenly father and his deference here to his father in this matter of when the return will be, it's mysteriously, it belongs to that loving relationship within the Trinity, even if we don't fully understand it.

[8 : 13] Okay, so where are we so far? Jesus is coming again as judge. We don't know when. So three, be ready. The first half of our passage is full of references to people not knowing.

Chapter 24, verse 39, they were unaware. Verse 42, you don't know. Verse 43, if the master of the house had known. Verse 44, coming at an hour, you don't expect. Verse 50, coming on a day when he does not expect him.

At an hour, he does not know. And then in chapter 25, verse 13, for you know neither the day nor the hour. So what is Jesus' instruction here? Stay awake.

Be on guard. Verse 42 and 43. Be ready. Verse 44. And watch, therefore. Chapter 25, verse 13. Simple, right?

Except for one huge question. How do I be ready? Which brings us to our fourth and final point. You're wondering how to be prepared?

[9 : 15] Jesus teaches us what readiness looks like. And there are at least five or six points here. But we're just going to drill down into two of them.

I've chosen two for us. And the first one that I want us to drill down into is make the most of your talents. And this comes in chapter 25, verses 14 to 30.

Make the most of your talents. And Jesus tells that parable which begins like this. For it, the hour of my return, will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.

To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. And then he went away. Well, this story, it begins with grace. It begins with the master entrusting his property to the care of his servants.

talents. And each one receives talents according to his ability. And that Greek word talent is just the largest sum of money possible. It would be one talent is 20 years wages for a laborer.

[10 : 21] So five talents is 100 years wages. And our English word talent, very helpfully here, it comes from this parable. So we know then that in our context, it doesn't just refer to money.

Talents are all of our abilities, our gifts, our strengths. And each of us have received those talents as a gift from God. And incidentally, that means that we ought to help one another to recognize what they are.

That's part of what it looks like to be the body of Christ together. And Jesus wants us to make the most of our talents as we wait for his return. And this includes all of your gifts, all the opportunities that you're given, your resources, your abilities.

All of that comes from God. And look how the two hard-working servants use their talents. In verse 16, we get three active verbs here in quick succession that show us what readiness looks like.

He who had received the five talents, what does he do? He went at once, traded with them, and made five talents more. In other words, Christian hope is active, not passive.

[11 : 31] And this parable, it might even surprise you to find Jesus describing not religious services and prayer vigils while we're waiting for his return, but something far more earthy.

He pictures us in the marketplace and in the home, working wisely and faithfully with the talents that we've been given so that followers of Christ, we don't jettison ambition, no.

Instead, we actually channel that ambition away from the social ladder and instead, we channel it towards eternal priorities for the glory of Christ. So that I know a member of St. John's who has talents with people and uses them to serve older men that are living in community housing in the downtown east side.

And I know another young man who's talented in the sciences and God has placed him in a position in the public sector where he's guiding and guarding policies that protect freshwater species and freshwater habitats.

And I know a young woman who cared so much about children that she actually gave up teaching for a season so that she could study theology full-time to form and grow her so that she could go back into teaching and bring that further gift back into a lifetime of teaching.

[12 : 51] And these three people, these are just three folks that are 30 and under. Every one of us has talents that God has given us. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to grow and nurture those talents.

So that in verse 19 when the master returns, this is what he discovers. He discovers that two of the servants have doubled their investment and they both receive identical praise and reward.

Look at verse 21. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much.

Enter into the joy of your master. Sometimes you'll hear these words read at a funeral for someone who's been a faithful Christian. These are the words that we all long to hear.

Well done, good and faithful servant. But what about the man with one talent who dug a hole and he buried it? Verse 24 tells us what happens to him. He also who had received one talent came forward saying, Master, I knew you to be a hard man reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you scattered no seeds, so I was afraid.

[14 : 00] I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, have what is yours. Well, if judgment is coming, maybe the safest bet is to just play it safe, try to avoid the danger of angering God by misusing his talents.

After all, isn't the Lord a hard man, harsh and severe to those who are sinners? But friends, this is such a tragic misunderstanding of God's character.

Jesus warns us that we can't use fear of failure as an excuse to be lazy and ungrateful for the talents that we receive. Being ready for Christ's return means taking risks for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus will not accept a theological excuse when he comes again. Well, Lord, if you really wanted it done, I know you could have predestined it to happen.

Do you remember how the English church leaders responded to William Carey when he said he wanted to be a missionary to India? They said, sit down, young man.

[15 : 08] When God chooses to save the heathen, he will do so without your help or ours. Make the most of your talents. We're looking at what readiness looks like for those who are waiting for Christ's return.

So let's look at one more picture. This picture comes back in chapter 24, so we're going back backwards, beginning at verse 45 to 51.

And I'm calling it caring for each other as faithful and wise servants. Verse 45, 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?

Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. One commentator puts it very well here.

Our focus in looking for Christ's return is not the sky, but the table. Again, there's a gift that the master gives here. This time it's a responsibility to care for the household, to feed them at the proper time.

[16 : 20] Which means we're not waiting for Christ's return in isolation, but always in community. We keep ready for Jesus as we care for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and by extension every person that we meet.

Jesus elaborates on this. He gives us a fuller expression at the very last scene, that long reading about the last judgment. And it's repeated three times.

Did you notice that? Which makes it clear that Jesus thinks it's very important. Remember the repetition of, for I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me a drink, stranger and you welcomed me, naked and sick and in prison.

Listen. And then the righteous answer and they say, Lord, when did we see you, all of those things? And the king will answer them, truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

You may know these words, these verses were the inspiration for Mother Teresa's ministry to the Dalit people in Calcutta. But you don't have to be a saint to fulfill Jesus' command here.

[17 : 32] Every single one of us has the opportunity to serve and love those in need. We're given those opportunities every day. In doing so, we serve and love Christ and keep ourselves ready for his glorious return.

So ask the Lord to open your eyes to recognize who he's giving you to love in this way. When we care for a loved one in palliative care, we prepare for Christ's return.

When you wake up at three in the morning with a child who's just had a nightmare and you're holding their hand, we're showing love for Christ. And when you welcome a stranger who's arrived from another country and you ask to know their name and you welcome them to share hospitality with you after the service, we are anticipating the Lord's return.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is coming again as judge. And we don't know when. So be prepared. And you want to know what preparation looks like?

Jesus teaches us. He says, make use of your talents and care for one another as faithful and wise servants. Notice how practical our obedience is.

[18 : 49] Being ready for Christ's return means serving the Lord in all areas of daily life. Amen. Amen.