

Introduction

Well there is nothing like starting off a new year and talking about the end. But that is what we are going to be doing this morning. And yet talking about the end should in fact help us to have a good beginning. Good beginnings are shaped by goals and a strong sense of where you want to be when the end comes. You can have a good idea of the goals you ought to set now at the beginning of a new year by asking yourself where you want to be at the end of the year. But this morning we are going to look not just toward the end of the year but to the end of the age. Where do you want to be, or better said, what do you want your condition to be when Jesus returns? Do you want to be found faithful? Do you desire to hear the words, "Well done good and faithful one?" Because if you do, then right now is the time to get ready for his appearing. And then, what should be your main goals to get you ready for that day? Well our text this morning addresses the main factor for being ready when Jesus returns.

You may remember back to the middle of December when we were finishing up Matthew 23. There on the temple grounds, Jesus pronounced several dreadful "woe"s upon the Pharisees and scribes, and he lamented the resistance of the city of Jerusalem and the Jews as a whole to gather up under his wings. He was leaving the city desolate. And as he and the disciples were going away from the temple grounds, the disciples were marveling at the buildings of the temple. But Jesus declared solemnly that at a future time the place would be demolished. The declaration prompted the disciples to think wonderingly about when it would happen. This is where we are this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

This chapter begins a significant body of teaching delivered by Jesus on the Mount of Olives. Hence it is called the Olivet Discourse. This chapter in the New Testament brings with it a fair amount of controversy. Understanding its contents is marked by a significant amount of struggle. D. A. Carson writes, "Few chapters in the Bible have called forth more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21. The history of the interpretation of this chapter is immensely complex." R. C. Sproul states, "I have wrestled with this passage for many years, and some of the views I have taken have had to give way to correction and change along the way. So I am not yet at the place where I am certain I can dogmatically declare the proper interpretation of this portion of sacred scripture."

The complexity and confusion have to do with discerning to what extent Jesus is speaking of the end of the Jewish age or the end of the human age and world history. To what extent is Jesus pointing to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and a corresponding end of the age of the Jews in AD 70? Or, to what extent is he speaking of the end of the age of humanity on earth? Conservative and scholarly interpreters answer these questions differently. Hence the controversy and the struggle to rightly explain the proper interpretation. Now, regarding Matthew 24:1-14, I am willing to consider either interpretation as the correct one and feel I cannot be dogmatic myself. I think the safest approach is to affirm that the "end" of which Jesus speaks in this text (verses 4-14) relates well BOTH to the end of the Jewish age AND to the end of the Human age, that is to the end of which Peter speaks when he says that the current earth will be destroyed and a new heaven and earth will take its place in which righteousness dwells. And so I am stepping over the controversy to the message which relates surely not only to the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking but also to us today who are disciples of Jesus.

The disciples came to Jesus privately and were asking when “these things” will be and what would be the sign of his coming and of this destruction taking place. Chapters 24-25 are the reply of Jesus to these questions. And you can sum up the whole of these two chapters generally. Jesus gives some clear warnings and he declares that the main thing for his disciples is not the WHEN but the FACT of these cataclysmic events, and the corresponding responsibility of his disciples is to live in alertness and readiness. It was true of the coming decimation of Jerusalem and it is true of Christ’s return to judge the world.

In the section we are examining this morning, the main message is endurance. Verse 13 is the central verse. “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” There are signs which point to the coming of the end. These signs involve many challenges and difficulties and temptations which will face the disciples of Jesus. So the main thing for them to be concerned about is not the timing of the end but enduring until it comes. For each of us the end could be the end of our lives. We shall not all live to the day of Christ’s coming. But we shall all live to the end of our lives. Endurance is the key. Christ’s true disciples are marked by perseverance. They continue to walk in the faith. They continue to walk in the truth. They are unswayed by the threats and persecutions they will face. They continue to hold fast to the gospel even though the waters roar and foam and the earth quakes at the ever-nearing culmination of God’s purposes on this earth.

The need for endurance stands out in several New Testament texts.

For example, in Colossians 1:11 Paul is describing the constant prayer he prays for these saints. He prays that they will be strengthened according to the glorious might of God FOR ALL ENDURANCE. The writer of Hebrews exhorts Christ’s followers to “run WITH ENDURANCE the race that is set before us.” We are to look to Jesus who ENDURED the cross.”

The Holy Spirit spoke about endurance with even more clarity and forcefulness in Hebrews 10. For just a minute, turn over to Hebrews 10:32 and following. Now remember, this important NT epistle was written to Jews who had embraced the gospel but were drifting away from their hold on Christ. They were being tempted and tested and were on the verge of turning away from Christ. So this was an urgent letter for them to persist in faith. And look what the author says here at the end of Hebrews 10. Start in verse 32.

32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

The author is pointing back to the strong confidence these persons had at the beginning, when they turned to Christ at the first. They were so confident in Christ that they endured suffering, public reproach and affliction, and shared in the suffering of other believers. They were joyful even when their property was seized because they knew that it was nothing compared to their eternal spiritual possession. Now, he is urging the Hebrews to keep holding on as they did before.

35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For,

“Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay;

38 but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

The word here is that God is highly displeased in those who turn back from him. The need is for endurance.

39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

The need for endurance is indisputable. Christ's followers are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. But this faith is not an on-again, off-again thing. True saving faith perseveres. It endures. And endurance is what it is through testing, through difficulty, through challenge. Gliding and drifting require no endurance. But living by faith as we anticipate the end of the age definitely requires endurance. And as we examine what Jesus says here at the outset of Matthew chapter 24, we see that Jesus is encouraging such endurance. In fact he provides four essential exhortations which teach Christ's followers HOW to endure as the end approaches. I am going to present them as four things NOT TO DO in order to persevere.

First,

I. Do Not Be Deceived.

In verse 4, Jesus warns, "See that no one leads you astray." The fact is that many will be led astray. Many will be deceived. Many are those who will not be saved because of what they believe and who they follow. Jesus declares as a prophecy here that (see verse 5) "many will come in my name, saying 'I am the Christ,' and will lead many astray."

In the 2000 years since Jesus walked in flesh, men and women with magnetic appeal have presented themselves as messiahs. They have drawn countless followers. Those followers of those false messiahs have been led astray.

But many will also be led astray by false prophets. These do not claim to be the Messiah but they contradict the true doctrine of Christ and his apostles. Down in verse 11, Jesus indicates that "Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray." To be led astray means to be enticed to follow a false path, to believe a lie, to leave what is right. This warning of Jesus is serious. Only those who endure to the end will be saved. That will exclude those who have allowed themselves to be led astray from Christ and from the true gospel. False Christs and false gospels abound. They promise deliverance and promote beliefs that captivate darkened minds, but they are false. They WILL NOT lead you where they promise. ONLY Jesus is the true Christ, the true Messiah, and only his gospel is the true gospel.

What is that gospel and how do we know we believe the true one? Each of us must answer for ourselves. God is not going to let people off the hook because they believe a liar. God has provided the truth in his word. And though there are teachers of that word and many who CLAIM to teach the word who in fact contradict one another, each of us is responsible for who and what we believe. Everyone of us must be a careful student of the scriptures. Each of us must be intent on knowing and believing the truth.

To do so we must recognize that our condition as sinful human beings means that we are prone to believe what our flesh would LIKE to believe. Many reject the gospel of Christ because there are things in it frankly which they do not like. Take Aaron Rodgers, for example. A couple years ago, the talented quarterback rejected biblical Christianity. He said: "I don't know how you can believe in a god who wants to

condemn most of the planet to a fiery hell. Like what type of loving, sensitive, omnipresent, omnipotent being wants to condemn most of his beautiful creation to a fiery hell?"

For Rodgers it comes down to rejecting something because he does not like it. He then caricatures it in such a way as to misrepresent the truth. The fact is according to the scripture that God does not WANT to condemn his creatures to hell; he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. But my point here is that we all have this proclivity. We tend to believe what we like or what makes sense to us.

But what we MUST do instead, is "study to show ourselves approved unto God, rightly dividing the word of truth." We must not accumulate teachers to suit our passions and wander off into myths. We have to be willing to believe the things God has revealed in his word, even if our flesh bristles and even if our minds are boggled. We must remember that we are but dust and that he is God. His ways are beyond our capacity to fully find out. Jesus is the Messiah and his gospel is good news because it teaches that sinners can and will be saved, but not by their own works and not by their own inventions and not by their own wisdom or intelligence. Those who are saved are those who persevere believing in Jesus Christ and the precious blood he shed to satisfy God's divine sentence of death for the commission of sin against him.

There is no other savior but Jesus Christ. And there is no other way of being saved through him but through faith in Him and what he has done. But those who turn from sin and trust in him will be truly and eternally saved. And they will persevere in believing the truth and following him. So, do not be deceived.

Second,

II. Do Not Be Alarmed.

Jesus prophesies a lot of horrific events in these verses. "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places." These are events which shake people up. They promote fear and dread.

It is like what the psalmist describes in Psalm 46—"the earth gives way, the mountains are moved into the heart of the sea, its waters roar and foam, the mountains tremble at its swelling." A world at war is a world of dread and misery. Hunger gnaws at its victims relentlessly and promotes a daily desperation for want of anything to satisfy. Earthquakes leave in shambles what men have built and wrecks lives and hopes and dreams. We can hardly imagine anything worse than these catastrophes, but Jesus declares that all of these are merely the birth pains of the end.

Speaking specifically of wars, Jesus says, "see that you are not alarmed, for this must take place but the end is not yet." When the waters roar and foam, God's people are not alarmed. They say, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and though the mountains tremble at its swelling." God's people call to mind according to Psalm 46 that "God makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire." Be not alarmed, dear brothers and sisters when the world totters and shakes under the pressure of the soon coming holy king. Be not alarmed. He has said these things would take place. He has warned it would be this way. Keep hoping and keep trusting in his sovereign power and unparalleled care and promise of future peace.

Third,

III. Do Not Be Disillusioned.

Jesus does not mince words here. Some coming circumstances are going to put professing Christians through the ringer. He warns that the world will hate Christ's followers and deliver them up to tribulation and death. On account of identifying with Christ, they will be subject to persecution. To top it off, some of Christ's professing followers will fall away from Christ and even turn on one another and hate one another. Their love will grow cold because of the increase of lawlessness in the world.

Christians will face trials in general but also hostility from the world. Persecution will rage against us. And the result is that MANY (v. 10) MANY who profess Christ will fall away. Moreover, these who fall away will turn on those who do not—betraying and even hating one another. The rise of lawlessness in the world will tempt Christ's followers to grow cold in their love. There will be plenty to tempt believers to disillusionment, to giving up, to turning cold, to turning away from Christ. To endure, you and I need to bear in mind the warnings Jesus has given to us. The intense and bewildering conditions do not mean that God has lost control. They do not mean God's plan has gone awry. They actually validate his promise. The end is not yet. But IT IS COMING. So hold on.

The turn in our own society against religious freedom is appalling. Freedoms which once were hallowed are now under threat in this country. It is not right! And it would be easy to react with disbelief and vengeance and fear and anxiety, and anger, and WITHOUT LOVE. But this is just what Jesus is warning his followers against. Do not let the spirit of the age get to you. Do not let the hosts that will gather against you cause you worry. Do not let the animosity of the world provoke you to behave unlovingly. Remember Paul's instructions. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'vengeance is mine I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink . . . do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:20-21).

We now come to the fourth element of endurance.

IV. Do Not Be Deterred.

Jesus mentions all these challenges that will come against the world in general and against believers in some particulars. But at last he mentions an accomplishment of God within the world as a witness to the world. He says, "The gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations."

The prophecy begs a question. "WHO is going to proclaim the gospel to the nations?" Well, Christ's followers, of course! To be proclaiming the gospel is a characteristic of endurance! To be taking it to places where it is not is both a work God will bring about as well as a commission to be obeyed. And so while facing the hostility of the world, Christ's followers are not to be deterred in proclaiming to the world the glorious gospel of the mercy of God. Preaching, teaching, sharing, and proclaiming Christ's kingdom is a calling, a privilege, and an obligation. It is also a key part of bringing forth the end of the age and the appearing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Those who believe the gospel are saved and those who reject it are condemned already. The nations will be without excuse. Believers who refuse to tell are without excuse as well. It is clear that the Lord has commissioned us to be a witness to the nations by the proclamation of the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. So as sure as you get prepared to resist the false messiahs and false teaching; as sure as you resolve to endure the horrors of living in a cursed world; as sure as you prepare for hostility from a hateful world and division with those who

once shared communion with you; refuse to be deterred from sharing Christ's good news wherever you are. The world needs to hear it and we NEED to tell it!

Conclusion

When will the end come? This much we know. It will not come without the appearance of false Christs and false prophets. It will not come without first the occurrence of world-wide atrocities. It will not come without there being a great swell of lawlessness and hostility, a large turning away of professed believers, and intense persecution. And it will not come without the gospel permeating the whole world as a witness to the nations. So what do Christians do to endure? Jesus says, don't be deceived; don't be alarmed; don't be disillusioned; and don't be deterred from proclaiming his gospel.

Jesus's warnings are staggering. Many will be led astray. Many will fall away. Many will turn away. The love of many will grow cold. But at the same time, Jesus's assurance is unshakeable. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Are you growing weary? Slipping in your love? Bewildered by the lawlessness in the world? Despised by the world? Unloved by some who once professed Christ? Troubled by the tyranny and disdain for religious freedoms so many are expressing in our day? You need endurance so that you may receive what is promised. Yet a little while and the coming one will come and will not delay; if you shrink back, he has no pleasure in you. Let's not be of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.