

I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Understand the End Times?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 24:36-51

To answer today's question would take a book. Not a sermon, not a pamphlet, a big, thick, dense book. You young people asked, "How do I understand the end times?" This is a much disputed question. Christians have very different views on this question. We do agree about the basics, I think. The basics are what the Apostles' Creed says about the end times. Do you remember what the Creed says about the end times? It says, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Just about all Christians believe that Jesus will return and that at the end of time he will judge the earth and its people.

But after that there are all kinds of opinions and differences. Some people believe that the end times will be relatively simple. History will go on, and then, one day Jesus will return, he will judge the living and the dead, he will destroy all evil and then we will be with him forever. It will all be one big event.

Other people say, no, it will be more complicated! Jesus will return and he will go to Jerusalem where he will reign for a thousand years. It's only after that 1000-year reign that Jesus will have the final battle against the devil, and then the last judgment will happen.

Still others add a couple of other events. Before the 1000-year reign in Jerusalem, there will be the rapture and the great tribulation. People who believe in the rapture, and there are lots of them, believe that the end times will start when God suddenly lifts all the righteous people out of the world. One minute they're there, and the next minute they're gone, they will be lifted up into the clouds to be with Jesus. The people who weren't really faithful believers will be left behind and they will have to endure the tribulation. For 7 years the world will fall into fighting and chaos. After the tribulation Jesus will come back from heaven, with all the people who are raptured, and he will reign in Jerusalem. If I had time, I'd tell you about all the different ways people think about the anti-Christ and all the different beliefs people have about what God will do with the Jews, and the differing views about how the temple will work in the end times. There are so many opinions.

I wonder, do you know what our church believes about these things? Do we believe in the rapture? Do we believe that the end times will start with a day when the righteous are suddenly zipped into heaven? No. The Christian Reformed Church and Reformed churches in general do not think the Bible teaches the rapture. Do we believe that Jesus will reign for a thousand years in Jerusalem at the end times? No. We don't believe that either. Our church teaches the simple view: Jesus will come at the end of time, and he will defeat evil and judge the living and the dead in one mighty event, and then he will set up the new creation on this earth.

But wait a minute, you might say, we don't believe in the rapture?! What about that Bible passage we just read!? "Two men will be working in a field; one will be taken, the other left." "Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken the other left." Isn't Jesus teaching the rapture? That's exactly what people who believe in the rapture say. "Matthew 24 teaches that the righteous will be taken away and the wicked left behind. It's right there!"

But just to show you how complicated this all is, let's look more closely at what our passage says. Jesus says that when the end times come it will be like the time of Noah and the flood. "Remember how it was in Noah's time? Everyone was eating and drinking and having a good time, and then the flood came and took them away." The flood took them away. Who's the 'them' in that sentence? The wicked. The wicked were the ones swept away by the flood, Noah and his family were left behind.

Now Jesus says the end times will be like the time of Noah, so who should we expect to be taken away and who will be left behind? In Noah's time, the wicked were taken and the righteous were left behind, so if that's the pattern we should expect the last judgement to take the wicked, and leave the righteous. It's the opposite of what the rapture teaches. If it's like Noah, and in Noah's time the wicked were taken away, shouldn't we expect the same thing for the end times?

You see how hard this is? That's really the point I want to make here. The Bible passages about the end times are really hard to interpret. They are harder than other passages. It's not like some of Jesus' other teachings. If you read the parable of the good Samaritan, you get it right away. You know what Jesus is talking

about. In the sermon on the mount, when Jesus says love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, we know what he means. It's clear. But end times passages are different. They speak about unfamiliar things. They use symbols. For example, right before our passage Jesus says, "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand – then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.'" Jesus forgive us, but it's not so easy for us readers to understand! End times passages are hard. Chapter 24 is hard. The book of Revelation is hard. This is why there is so much disagreement between churches. This is why so many Christians have different ideas about the way Jesus will return.

And that's the first thing I want to say in response to your question. How do I understand the end times? You understand them very carefully. You understand them with great humility. We know that Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead, but the exact manner of that return is something we can talk about and wonder about, but we can't know these things with certainty.

In fact, that's what Jesus is trying to teach us in this passage! "You can't know the day or the hour!" says Jesus. "Not only that, even I don't know the day or the hour! Only the Father knows." The details of the end times are so obscure that while he is on this earth, even Jesus doesn't know the details. Jesus teaches this consistently. He repeatedly tries to limit our curiosity about the end times. Acts 1 verse 7: Jesus says to his disciples: "It is not for you to know the times or the dates." In Luke 21, the disciples ask Jesus, "When will these things happen?" And Jesus says, "Watch out don't be deceived, for many will come in my name saying... the time is near... Don't listen to them." Jesus doesn't want us to get too caught up with end times speculation, especially when it comes to predictions of when it's going to happen.

You may ask, so why does he talk about it then? If he doesn't want us to speculate, then why does he preach this sermon? Why does he talk about these things? I think there are a couple of things we can say: Jesus wants us to watch and he wants us to work.

First, he wants us to keep watch. Verse 42: "Therefore keep watch because you don't know on which day your Lord will come." While it is possible to think too much about the end times, while it is possible to get caught up in wild speculation, it is also very possible to think too little about the end times. It is very possible to think too little about Christ's return and Christ's judgment. It's very possible to live your life without ever thinking about Christ's judgment or Christ's return. And that's definitely something that Jesus is concerned about. In fact, that's Jesus' primary concern in this passage. He makes that point with not one, not two, but three illustrations. Don't be like the people in Noah's time who were partying and didn't see the flood coming. Don't be like the person who didn't prepare for the thief coming in the night. Don't be like a servant who partied and avoided his master's work because he didn't think his master was coming back. Be ready. Keep watch!

What does keeping watch mean? It's not keeping your eyes on the skies, and on the news, speculating about whether it will happen soon. Keeping watch means looking more deeply. It means seeing beneath the surface of things. It means discerning the spirits. It means seeing the true story of the world.

The true story of this world. That's a phrase I use a lot. What do I mean by that? Well if you were looking around in the world and all you watched was your Instagram feed, the news headlines, the sitcoms and the advertisements shoved in your face every day, what would you think the world was about? What would the story of the world be, if that's all you saw? It would be a story of money, power and pleasure. It would be a story where the beautiful and the powerful and the wealthy run things. If those sources were the only source you had to construct your life, here's the story you would tell yourself: "Life is short. Beauty, power and money are what moves things in this world, so I should get as much beauty power and money as I can and use them for my myself and my family." If all you have is TV and your social media feed, you will probably default to that story.

That's what Jesus doesn't want to happen. That's what happens to the servant in the little parable Jesus tells. The true story of that servant's life is that he is the servant of the master, that he is there to steward his master's things and take care of his fellow servants, to give them their food at the proper time. But the servant stops expecting his master, so he changes the story he lives by: 'This is my stuff, to do with as I please.' He starts abusing his fellow servants and using his master's stuff for himself. He defaults to the beauty, power and pleasure story. That's what it means to lose track of the true story of your life. That's what Jesus is worried about. Do we see that in the modern church? Do we see people losing the thread of the story and slipping into a life centered on themselves, on beauty, power and pleasure? Yes. Yes, we do.

Keep watch! Look beneath the surface of things. Look deeper. This world belongs to God. It is his handiwork. He loves this world and its people and he sent his son to redeem it. The central moment in the story of this world was the death and resurrection of Jesus. God is making all things new and someday he will return again to judge the living in the dead. In the meantime, he calls us to be his workers and his witnesses, to show his love, his righteousness, his grace. This is the true story of the world, it's a story of hope, and grace and love and justice and sacrifice and eternal life. It's beautiful and it's true, and at the end of all things every eye will see it.

So people with a healthy end times mindset keep watch. But they also work. What's the appropriate work for people who expect Christ's return? Jesus gives us a very clear answer. Our passage is in the middle of a long sermon about the end times that starts at the beginning of chapter 24 and goes to the end of chapter 25. That sermon closes with a series of four parables about the return of the master, about the return of the Lord. And in each of the parables there is a clear contrast between the work an end times ready person should be doing and the work they should not be doing.

In the parable of the wicked servant at the end of our passage, what is the servant supposed to be doing? Taking care of his fellow servants and giving them their food at the proper time. So what does a watchful, end times ready servant do?? He's takes care of his fellow servants, of the people in God's family. He thinks about the needs of his fellow believers and gives time to them. That's his work.

The next Parable is the one Rachel read earlier in the service. That's the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In that parable, what does keeping watch for the end times look like? It's keeping your lamp well fed with oil. I think that means practicing the devotional disciplines of the faith: worship, prayer, study. Keeping your heart and mind fixed on Jesus and the gospel. That's the work.

The third parable is what your pew Bible calls the parable of the bags of gold, sometimes it's called the parable of the talents. In this parable the wicked servant buries his money, his talent in the ground and just sits around all day. What do the good servants do? They take their resources and use them to build the kingdom of God. They work and grow and serve. What does someone who is properly keeping watch look like in this parable. Someone who is vigorously using their time, talent and treasure for the Kingdom, helping the church, stabilizing schools, building helping institutions. That's the work.

The last parable is the parable of the sheep and the goats. I think you all know that one. In that parable what are the end times ready people doing? Who are the ones ready for the master's return? They are the ones feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the prisoner. They are the ones whose love isn't just caring for fellow servants, but spills over into the lives of needy neighbors. That's the work.

Watchful readiness is less about figuring out signs and time lines and more about faithful service. Here's how Frederick Bruner, a leading scholar on Matthew puts it: "Jesus' sermon does not intend to create apocalyptic seers; it intends to create Spiritual and moral long distance runners."

Last Monday I went to my first deacons meeting here at LaGrave. I've always gone to the elders' meetings, but never to deacons'. This week it was deacons. We met for over two hours. Our deacons are a group of busy people. They are busy with their jobs and family and serving on other committees and caring for elderly parents, and yet they were willing to spend a long night carefully and prayerfully wrestling with how best to help people in our community. Together we gave out money that you have generously donated and we used it to help members and friends who have fallen on hard times. And they did it thoughtfully, with empathy and care, trying to help people and not enable them. You know what I saw in that room? A group of people who were keeping watch. I saw a group of people who were end time ready. If the master came back and found them in that room he would find a group of people watching and working, a group of people about the master's business. And it was really good.

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