

## A Preacher of Judgment

Matt. 24:1-14

The teachings Jesus gave us during His last week before the cross have the special value of "last words." With limited time and opportunity, last words are thought of as most significant and important. And the church has so regarded these words of Jesus. It should not surprise us, if we understand anything of the body of Jesus teaching to find in these last words a warning of the judgment to come.

Jesus commuted during this last week in and out of the city of Jerusalem. It was probably a concern for safety that prompted this policy. If Jesus' had stayed in the city and His location was known then it would have been an opportunity for His enemies to take Him. So, Jesus walked back and forth from Bethany the first couple of nights but then, on this night He climbed with the disciples the hill above the city called the Mount of Olives. From there they were able to look down on the temple grounds and this "bird's eye view" gave the disciples occasion to look with admiration on the beautiful edifice that Herod had built. They brought this to Jesus' attention.

Jesus' reply was provocative, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down." It is, I think, human nature to feel that the structures around our lives will endure into a distant and far reaching future. In our own recent experience the destruction of the twin towers in New York City are a case in point. If you see a movie filmed in New York before the tragedy the towers represent a permanence of the skyline that could not then be doubted. For the disciples, the temple compound appeared to represent just such an edifice. What Jesus said was shocking, and outside of what was thinkable in His day and particularly in the presence of the temple and in the city of Jerusalem. In addition, the Jews continued to believe that God would preserve His city and His temple against the ravages of the nations which sought to destroy them. Jesus' words made sense to the disciples only in the context of the end of time. At the end, the temple would

no longer be needed and so its destruction seemed acceptable then. These presumptions blinded the disciples to any other possibility.

So they responded with a series of questions, "When will these things be? What will be the sign of Your coming? And of the end of the age?" Jesus' answer was intended to prepare His disciples for what was to come, that is the disciples who were there to hear His answer and those who would read and study it later. To be prepared for what is to come means ultimately to be prepared for the judgment.

It should be no surprise that Jesus' teaching about last things would have this burden. No one in all of Scripture has the acute sense of the immanence of the judgment like Jesus. The judgment was in the original call of John and Jesus, "Repent! for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The need to be prepared for a judgment is seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount. "Rejoice and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven." "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of heaven." "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal for where your treasure is there your heart will be also." "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." "Judge not that you be not judged." "And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness."

Of the centurion whose servant Jesus healed, He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from the east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Of the cities that saw the most of Jesus' ministry Jesus said, "Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in

you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you..."

The kingdom parables of Matthew 13 are deeply concerned with judgment. All four of the types of seed sown in the first parable experience a judgment. The tares among the wheat are left to grow alongside the wheat until the harvest (the judgment). The lesson of the dragnet was, "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus' call to commitment anticipated the judgment, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works."

Even the lesson of forgiveness as taught to Peter and the disciples in Matt. 18 relied on an awareness of ultimate judgment, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Add to all of this Jesus' diatribe of woe against the Pharisees for their rejection of Him and His lament of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. See! Your house is left to you desolate. For I say to you, you shall see me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

I was talking with a friend one time about our experience of Golden Gate Seminary. I had already graduated a few years earlier and he was still taking classes there. As students do, we were talking about professors we enjoyed and about some we did not. And I recalled one of the strangest academic experiences I have ever had. A church education professor I had meticulously taken attendance

at every meeting of his class. The grade for the was based solely on 2 or three book reports we were to turn in. There were no tests on the lectures he gave and as a result, no one bothered to take notes and in fact, he seemed to not pay any attention to them either, as he often repeated stories from week to week and generally seemed as disengaged as his students. I named him as my worst professor ever. He was an elderly man and he seemed to me to be riding along to retirement and just no longer cared. I had heard that he had experienced a massive heart attack the succeeding year and I assumed that if he had survived then he would surely be retired by that time. My friend shared that the old professor was still teaching and that his class was not anything like what I had described. He said that he was on fire with passion for God's work and that he was certainly one of his favorite professors. To say that his massive heart attack woke him up seems like a great understatement. The professor I knew had become completely detached from any sense of impending judgment. He had even removed such a concept from his teaching method. The post heart attack professor my friend knew was now deeply affected by the judgment. It showed in everything he did.

Jesus was always acutely aware of the judgment. He lived closer to the reality of the presence of God than any of us can possibly know and it showed up in everything He did and said. If we can borrow the truth from the one who knows much better and more than ourselves, we will learn to think of the judgment and to consistently and consciously prepare for that day.