

# Sermons on Matthew

## Don't You Believe It

Matthew 24:23-26

*With Study Questions*

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Then if anyone says to you, '*Look, here is the Christ!*' or '*There!*' do not believe *it*.<sup>-24-</sup> For *false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.*<sup>-25-</sup> See, I have told you beforehand.

<sup>-26-</sup> "*Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it (Matthew 24:23-26).*

## **Introduction – Three Approaches**

I will continue to show the Olivet Discourse to be consistent with the unique historical event of the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, not the inevitable future of the world. This does not mean there is no application for Christians throughout the centuries who find themselves in similar circumstances. Finally, we will seek the counsel of Christ that we might be wise when confronted with these types of things.

## **Unique History**

It is not difficult to show in this portion of the Olivet Discourse that these events (false christs, false prophets, lying signs and wonders) were obstacles facing the first century church.

## **False Christs**

The Apostle John speaks of the current event of antichrists:

**Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour (1 John 2:18).**

Antichrists *antichristos*, (as compared to false christs *pseudochristoi*) it must be explained, can mean either against Christ or instead of Christ, or perhaps, combining the two, “one who, assuming the guise of Christ, opposes Christ”.<sup>1</sup> By John we know that there were already false christs aplenty in the first century.

## **False Prophets**

Peter informs the first century believers that they would contend with false prophets *pseudoprophetai* as well:

**But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be \_\_false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction (2 Peter 2:1).**

And what of lying signs and wonders? We turn to 2 Thessalonians 2:5-9; a passage often viewed as our future

## **Lying Signs**

**Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? (Paul reminds his of his earlier instruction.) -<sup>6</sup>- **And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time.** (Paul assumes his readers know what is restraining the lawless one.) -<sup>7</sup>- **For \_the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only \_\_He who now restrains will do so until \_\_He is taken out of the way.** (The mystery of lawlessness is already at work.) -<sup>8</sup>- **And then the lawless one will be revealed, \_whom the Lord will consume \_\_with the breath of His mouth and destroy \_\_with the brightness of His coming.** -<sup>9</sup>- (We then see the lying signs and wonders.) **The coming of the *lawless one* is \_\_according to the working of Satan, with all power, \_\_signs, and lying wonders... (2 Thessalonians 2:5-9).****

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<sup>1</sup>Vine, W. (1981; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *Vine's Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words* (Page 62). Old Tappan NJ: Revell.

Paul, writing to the church at Thessalonica, reminds them of what he had told them, assumes they know what is restraining the lawless one, tells them the mystery of lawlessness is already at work and then informs them that the one who restrains will be taken out of the way which will result in the revealing of the lawless one whom the Lord will destroy.<sup>2</sup>

This text shows the significance of Paul's words to the original audience who were the ones dealing first hand with these issues. He then informs the church at Thessalonica (in the first century) that the lawless one will be accompanied by signs and lying wonders.

### **A Warning for all Ages**

The nature of these lying signs and wonders is not the issue here. The point is the things Jesus spoke of were prevalent in the first century church as the Old Covenant was coming to an end. But that does not make this passage insignificant for us. Jesus gives a warning:

**Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe *it* (Matthew 24:23).**

### **Good and Bad Faith**

Sometimes faith is good and sometimes faith is bad. There is a very sentimental mantra that wafts its way through cultures suggesting that you just need to believe, you just need faith – all this without imposing any discrimination upon that which is the object of that faith. And, although we should avoid becoming so cynical that we continually question the motives behind any human action, there are certain things that require a healthy dose of examination – not the least of which is a presentation of Jesus Christ.

The gospels are rife with the call to believe and are almost unanimously critical of unbelief. Unbelief, due to the undeniable reality of God's self-revelation (both in nature and Scripture), is nothing less than a sin!

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<sup>2</sup> I am not explaining what all this means, just that they were first century events.

**Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).**

But mark this well in our current culture of anti-rationalism, that belief in one thing often necessitates unbelief in something else. In a fashion uncharacteristic of His normal call to believe, Jesus issues a call to unbelief...**"do not believe *it*,"** He says.

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And what are we called not to believe in?

### **Don't Believe in...**

At least here, the call to unbelief is not directed at paganism. Jesus is not telling them to suspend their belief when it comes to the pantheon of Rome. The warning is not against belief in Jupiter or Apollo or Diana (which caused a riot during the ministry of Paul—Acts 19:21-30).

For our current purposes, the call to unbelief is not directed toward a system of atheism, evolutionism or naturalism. It is not a warning against embracing the god of Islam, Buddhists or Hindus. The call to unbelief is much closer to home than that. Jesus tells them to exercise unbelief when people are seeking to lead them to Christ! **"...if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!\_' or 'There!\_' do not believe *it*."**

Against turbulent protests, everybody has their god—though it is not always as organized as a world religion. Whether it's your personal life and world view (a god often fashioned by rock stars and politicians) or an unwavering commitment to the Buddhism of the Dalai Lama, every person functions in this life according to some system of belief. Jesus, at least here, is not addressing a religion, or life and world view that is blatantly unchristian.

Jesus speaks regarding those who have a veneer of Christianity. He speaks of those who, as Paul writes, have **"a form of godliness but (deny) its power"** (2 Timothy 3:5a). Jesus explains why He issues the word—this call to unbelief:

**For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect (Matthew 24:24).**

## Deceiving the Elect

False christs and their false prophets performing their lying signs and wonders can be arresting to the soul and winsome to the point of captivation. Their ability to deceive, Jesus conveys by way of overstatement (“**if possible**”)<sup>3</sup>, is a picture of these liars and fakes snatching God’s children out of His very hand – which Jesus declares to be impossible elsewhere (John 10:28, 29).

But the point is to be well taken: Pseudochristianity is a dangerous disease festering within the borders of Christendom. And just because no power in heaven or earth can separate the true Christian from the saving love and grace of God, it does not follow that Christian churches and the Christianity they present cannot go the way of Balaam, the prophet “**who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel**” (Revelation 2:14b).

It is both foolish and selfish to think that sound doctrine (which is necessary for spotting false christs) isn’t worth fighting for simply because *you* happen to really be a Christian. What about your spiritual legacy? What about those who follow you? Jude admonishes us to “**contend earnestly for the faith**” (Jude 3b). It is not our nature to endure sound doctrine; it is something for which we must fight.

## Spotting False Christs

How adept would you be at spotting a false christ? By false christs I am not speaking of David Koresh or Sun Myung Moon (although it would certainly include them). I am speaking of a false presentation of the true Christ – which would then make Him a false christ. How well will the clay toes of the modern western church resist inevitable implosion with their quest for an undefined Jesus?

Remember when Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people clamored for a god or gods to lead them. Aaron gathered the gold and fashioned a molded calf. He then told them who that calf was: “**This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!**” (Exodus 32:4b). Aaron wasn’t presenting a false god but a false

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<sup>3</sup> I agree with Robertson who explains, “The implication is that it is not possible.” (from Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Mt 24:24-26). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems)

presentation of the true God; it's insidious! When Moses came down and said, "**Whoever is on the Lord's side – come to me**" (Exodus 32:26) where would you go? The God of Moses or the God of Aaron? How would you know the difference?

When you hear Christianity explained as God accepting people for who they are, would you know the difference between that Christ and the Christ who calls sinners to repentance and transforms lives? When Jesus is presented as the silent gentleman who never goes where He's not asked, would you know the difference between that Jesus and the Jesus who lovingly and powerfully invades the rebellious human heart with His light and grace (Acts 16:14)?

How well do we actually know Jesus? How easily can we spot a false presentation of Christ? If your bumper sticker reads "My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter," is that sufficient? Have you contended for the faith? Recognizing with all humility that there is an incomprehensibility to Christ in terms of the infinite nature of His deity and unfathomable depths of His passion (suffering), we are nonetheless called to discriminate between the truth about Christ and the errors, lest we begin to follow the calf of Aaron.

Knowing the true Christ and the truth about the true Christ is a lifelong endeavor. But at the forefront of our minds should be those things considered catechismal – things we want our children to know.

## Catechism

We should know that Jesus is the *eternal Son of God* (He always was) who, in the fullness of time *became man* (Galatians 4:4) – *fully God and fully man* (John 1:1; Hebrews 1:8; 4:15). Jesus is the *Mediator of God's covenant of grace* (Hebrews 9:15), in other words He intervenes on our behalf and presents us holy and without spot or blemish before the Father (Ephesians 5:27).

As our Mediator (our representative and God's representative, our champion and God's sacrifice) the recognition of *His god-hood* is essential; how else could He keep from sinking under the infinite wrath of God – a wrath we deserved that He took (1 Peter 2:24). Those who deny this inevitably find themselves seeking to finish the incomplete salvation left by a mere man or prophet.

Jesus was also *fully man* that He might perform the obedience no sinful man could perform (Galatians 4:4) – we must know that Jesus comes

to us as God (Colossians 2:9) but He goes to God on our behalf as a Man (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 6:19) – achieving what no man could achieve and freely giving His victory over sin and death to all who call upon His Name (2 Corinthians 5:20, 21).

The certainty of Christ's power to save His people is shown in His very name, *Jesus*, which name He has "for He will His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Jesus is called *Christ* (the words means anointed – the idea of God's special choice) because He was anointed with the Holy Spirit beyond measure (John 3:34), set apart and fully furnished with all authority and ability.

Jesus, our Mediator, was fully furnished with all authority and ability to execute *His offices* – do we know them, because Jewish carpenter isn't one of them? Do we know them and do we know why they are both comforting to us and honoring to God? His offices are *Prophet, Priest* and *King*.

As *Prophet* (Acts 3:21, 22), Jesus reveals, by His Spirit and word, the whole will of God in all things for our edification and salvation. As *Priest* (Hebrews 5:5-7) Jesus is Himself the offering for sin (Hebrews 9:14, 28) reconciling us to the Father. And as our High Priest He ever intercedes for us against the endless accusations of the enemy of our souls (Hebrews 7:25). As *King* (Psalm 2:6; Matthew 21:5; Isaiah 9:6, 7) Jesus has called us to Himself as our Master. Our King preserves us and corrects us (Isaiah 63:9), restrains and overcomes enemies (1 Corinthians 15:25; Psalm 110:1, 2) and powerfully orders all things for His own glory and our own good (Romans 14:10, 11; 8:28).

Would you know, friends, the true Jesus from Aaron's calf? Keep in mind that the antichrists of which John wrote were antichrists due to their false teachings about Jesus – denying He was the Christ (1 John 2:22) and denying He had come in the flesh (1 John 4:3); and I don't think John was giving an exhaustive list of antichristian presentations of Jesus.

### **Any Port in the Storm**

Difficult times were ahead when Jesus gave His Olivet Discourse. And the charlatans were ready to prey upon those who did not heed the instruction. An 'any port in the storm' theology was about to prevail. They were forewarned:

**See, I have told you beforehand. <sup>-26-</sup> “\_Therefore if they say to you, ‘\_Look, He is in the desert!’\_ do not go out; or ‘\_Look, He is in the inner rooms!’\_ do not believe it (Matthew 24:25, 26).**

My parents were not church-goers. The only time I remember my father wanting to go to church was when my mother was sick and a faith healer came to town – it’s pernicious. No pilgrimage is needed (John 4:21) to find Jesus nor will you find Him in your prayer closet (Matthew 6:6). In our present context Jesus is saying that He will find them – Jesus was coming in judgment the way lightning flashes across the sky (Matthew 24:27).

Jesus presents Himself by word and sacrament. Even the miracles played second fiddle to a presentation of the true God:

**\_If there arises among you a prophet or a \_\_dreamer of dreams, \_and he gives you a sign or a wonder, <sup>-2-</sup> and \_\_the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘\_Let us go after other gods’ – which you have not known – ‘\_and let us serve them,‘ <sup>-3-</sup> you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God \_\_is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 13:1-3).**

Miracles may bring our attention to doctrine, but it is biblical doctrine which, by the illuminating work of God’s Spirit, shines as true in our hearts and minds – it is the truth about Jesus and nothing is more valuable or precious.

I have given but a brief presentation of the character and attributes of the true Biblical Jesus. Knowing the true Christ is to be our lifelong pursuit. Let us be diligent. The church must be wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16) or we will be governed by serpents (Genesis 3:1).

## Questions for Study

1. Discuss the different ways the events of the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled in the first century (pages 2-4).
2. Is all faith good? Explain (pages 4, 5).
3. What is Jesus telling us 'not' to believe in (page 5)?
4. Discuss the idea of deceiving the elect. Is this possible? Why does Jesus say this (page 6)?
5. What is necessary in order to spot false christs (pages 6, 7)?
6. Go over some of the catechismal statement about Jesus (pages 7, 8).
7. How is Jesus found (page 9)?