

Matthew 21-25: Stories of the End

This next section of the Gospel focuses on the center of Jewish faith and practice – Jerusalem – and the fatal climactic conflict that occurs there. Finally, the culmination of Jesus’ three passion predictions (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19) begins to take place. After Jesus’ so-called “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem (21:1-11), he immediately enters the Temple, overturning the tables of the money-changers and condemning those who have turned this holy place into a “den of robbers” (21:12-17). Jesus’ incendiary actions in the Temple and his harsh judgments proclaimed in a series of parables (21:18-22:14), verbal duels (22:15-46), and woes (23:1-39) incite the rage of the Jewish leaders. Chapters 24-25 focus on eschatology (what will happen in the end times) and comprise Jesus’ fifth and last major discourse in Matthew.

The “Triumphal Entry” (21:1-17)

Before Jesus enters Jerusalem, he sends two disciples on ahead to procure a donkey and a colt (another Matthean doubling that fulfills Isa. 62:11 and Zech. 9:9, but also produces the odd picture of Jesus straddling two animals in 21:7). There is some debate over whether this is a case of instance of *angaria*, the practice whereby rulers could “impress” (commandeer) transportation from the general public (see, similarly, 1 Sam. 8:17); some argue that Jesus is enacting *angaria* as a royal right. Still, Matthew 21:4 indicates that Jesus will “return” animals, a note missing from the Lukan version of this story (19:31).

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem has been compared to an ancient “triumph,” the common Greco-Roman entrance processions welcoming important Roman leaders and

war heroes into a city. At such events, city inhabitants would go out to meet the conqueror/ruler and escort him into the city, accompanied by celebratory acclamations. Frequently, the entrance was followed by a ritual of appropriation, such as a sacrifice, in one of the city's holy places, like a temple. If this process was not followed, inhabitants risked the destruction of their city (as Judas Maccabeus destroyed the city of Efron when they refused to welcome him; 1 Macc. 5:45-51).

Some take these similarities as a straightforward depiction of Jesus as quintessential rival to Caesar. Many commentators have emphasized that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is politically and religiously radical, ultimately contributing to his death. Some hold the diametrically opposed view – that Jesus is portrayed as a misunderstood humble servant marching resolutely, not toward the seat of power, but toward the cross. After all, he does not ride a warhorse like a conquering hero; he rides a donkey, which is often touted as a poor person's beast of servitude (though Solomon rides a donkey in 1 Kgs. 1:32-40). Neither does Jesus sacrifice in the Temple, as would have been the protocol at the end of a typical Greco-Roman triumphal entry, and ultimately, he does not stage a violent political/military revolution.

There are Jewish resonances as well. During the Jewish Feast of Booths, participants would carry palm and willow branches (Lev. 23:39-43); at times, these were spread across the road in celebration (as when Simon liberated Jerusalem in 1 Macc. 13:42, 51 and when Judas rededicated the Temple in 2 Macc. 10:7-9). The crowd's acclamation, "Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord" echoes Psalm 118:26, part of the Hallel Psalms that often were chanted at Jewish festivals. Overall, this

passage ties together both Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions and functions as a turning point in the narrative as Jesus willingly moves closer to his own suffering and death.

Matthew's version of Jesus' ride down from the Mount of Olives paints the picture of an explosive, exuberant scene: a horde of people throng around Jesus, and shouts of praise fill the air. Matthew does not include the detail found in Luke 19:39, where the Pharisees tell Jesus to silence his disciples. Instead, the praises and crowds reverberate into the next scene.

The Cleansing of the Temple (21:12-17) and the Cursing of the Fig Tree (21:18-22)

After entering the city, Jesus immediately goes to the Temple. The atmosphere is still loud and explosive, but the tone changes from joy to judgment. Jesus attacks the economic practices operative in the Temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves, which the poor bought to sacrifice (21:12). Citing Old Testament passages that condemn injustice (Isa. 56:6-7; Jer. 7:11), Jesus pronounces judgment against the exploitative commercialism that drives the Temple's sacrificial system. The prophetic symbolism of both his dramatic actions in the Temple and his cursing of a fig tree outside the city (21:18-22) point toward the judgment of Israel, and retroactively explain the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., of which Matthew's readers certainly would have been aware.

Three Parables: Stimulus for Confrontation (21:23–22:14)

Jesus' pronouncement of judgment on the Jerusalem leaders continues into three parables that foreshadow the destruction of the Temple: the Parable of the Two Sons (21:28-32);

the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33-46); and the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (22:1-14), each of which creates a polemical contrast between those in power (the Jewish leaders, working with Rome) who challenge Jesus' authority, and those who do not have worldly power, but nevertheless, accept Jesus' authority and bear godly fruit. For Matthew's Jesus, the people of God are not those who consider themselves worthy of entering the kingdom, but a community of both Jews and Gentiles who accept God's invitation through Jesus in faith.

Confrontation and Controversy (22:15-46)

Following these parables of judgment, Jesus faces direct challenges from different factions of Jewish leaders, all of whom try to entrap him (22:15) with controversial questions: the Pharisees and Herodians ask him about paying taxes to Caesar (22:15-22); the Sadducees inquire about marriage at the resurrection – a tricky question because Sadducees did not believe in resurrection from the dead (22:23-33); and the Pharisees return with a question about which is the greatest commandment (22:34-40). In each case, Jesus' response is brilliantly creative. Traditionally, scholars have labeled such scenes “challenge-riposte” scenarios, or “controversy dialogues,” in which interlocutors vie for honor through conversational combat. These exchanges are more than mere dialogues; they are duels: the speakers thrust, deflect, counterthrust. This is a war of words.

At 22:41, Jesus shifts from a defensive position, responding to their questions, to an offensive position, asking his own: “What do you [Pharisees] think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” (22:42) Their response, “The son of David,” opens the door for Jesus to quote Psalm 110:1 and pose his own interpretive conundrum: if, as tradition had it,

David penned the Psalms, then how could he call his son, the Messiah, “Lord”? (22:45)

With this, Jesus effectively silences his opposition, who do not “dare to ask him any more questions” (22:46). From this point on, the Jewish leaders seek to attack Jesus on a physical, rather than verbal, level.

Warnings About the Pharisees (23:1-12) and Woes Against Them (23:13-36)

Jesus’ verbal attacks on the Jewish leaders, however, continue. In this highly vituperative section, Jesus uses language derived from conventional ancient polemic – snakes, blind guides, deceivers who say one thing but do another, etc. – to highlight the Pharisees’ self-serving hypocrisy and lack of integrity. He contrasts their duplicity regarding what they do and do not do (23:1-7) with what disciples should do and should not do (23:8-12), with the latter recalling the humility extolled earlier in the Gospel (e.g., 18:1-4; 20:25-28). Jesus’ seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees (23:13-36) fit well with the woes found in conventional prophetic traditions (see Isa. 3:9-11; 5:8-23); these seven woes progressively address the Jewish leaders’ negative effect on others (23:13-15), their erroneous prioritizing of minor issues over “weightier” matters like justice and mercy (23:16-24), their focus on exterior cleanliness rather than interior purity (23:25-28), and their murderous reception of God’s emissaries (23:29-36). Together, these condemnations justify the divine judgment that Jesus insists is coming on his opponents. These “woes” reflect the intense polemic between Matthew’s Christian community and their more traditional Jewish neighbors. They should not be construed as an objective assessment of all Pharisees.

Lamentation over Jerusalem (23:37-39)

The ending of chapter 23 contrasts starkly with the polemical tone of the preceding verses. Jesus' audience has expanded from the scribes and Pharisees to the whole city of Jerusalem, and he expresses his deep sorrow over their rejection using images of divine protection (Exod. 19:4; Deut. 32:11; Ps. 17:8; 36:7).

The Destruction of the Temple Foretold and the Mount of Olives Discourse (24:1–25:46)

At the end of his second day in the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus exits the Temple for the last time. Again, Jesus refers to the Temple's destruction by the Romans in 70 C.E. (24:1-2). Some scholars see in this moment an allusion to the ancient belief (attested in both Jewish and Roman sources) that a city's destruction would be preceded by the departure of its protective deity. From this perspective, 23:38 ("Your house is abandoned") refers to God's departure, which leaves the Temple and the whole city of Jerusalem vulnerable to defeat by its enemies.

Jesus goes east of the Jerusalem Temple Mount to the Mount of Olives, where tradition said the glory of God went after departing the Temple (Ezek. 10:18; 11:23), and where the Messiah would appear to establish God's reign (Zech. 14:1-9). There, Jesus delivers the so-called Olivet Discourse, the last of the five great discourses in Matthew (note the typical ending, "when Jesus had finished all these sayings" in 26:1). In an expansion of his source, Matthew both preserves the obscure apocalyptic language of Mark's "little apocalypse" (see Mk. 13) and periodically adds more specific language. For example, whereas Mark 13:14 refers obliquely to "the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be," Matthew explicitly refers to Daniel, locating the "desolating sacrilege" in the Temple (24:15); in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11, we read about the

Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated the Jerusalem Temple in 167 C.E. by instead worshipping the Greek god Zeus inside its walls.

In this long eschatological speech, Jesus offers his disciples a confidential briefing about what is going to happen (24:3–25:46): he describes the signs of the end of the age using images that would have been familiar to most of Matthew’s readers, including predictions of tribulation on the earth (24:3-28) and chaos in heaven (24:29). It was commonly thought that in the end times, cosmic chaos would reflect the suffering and persecution of the faithful on the earth. The *parousia* – the coming of the Son of Man “on the clouds of heaven” (see Dan. 7:13) – will be public, dramatic, and evident to all (24:30-31), though Jesus uses the object lesson of the fig tree’s summertime blossoms to underscore the importance of recognizing the signs (24:32-35). Jesus also emphasizes that the timeline is unknown; thus, vigilant watchfulness is required (24:36-51).

Three successive parables reinforce the theme of watchfulness: the Parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1-13); the Parable of the Talents (25:14-30); and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46). The overarching message of these brief stories is twofold: be ready at all times for Christ’s return, and remain faithful in the tasks you have been given in the interim. In true Matthean fashion, the parables emphasize that failure to do this will have dire consequences in the final judgment: like the foolish bridesmaids, the unprepared will be turned away (25:11-12); like the “lazy” slave, those who do not invest what they have been given will be “thrown into outer darkness” (25:30); like the goats, those who fail to care for those in need will be sent “into the eternal fire” (25:41, 46). In contrast, “the righteous” will share the Messiah’s joy (25:23) and enter “into eternal life” (25:46).

Questions for discussion:

1. Jesus' double-love commandment (combining Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) is an important guiding principle for Christians today. How does this play out in practical terms in your life? What does it mean to you to "love God and love neighbor" simultaneously?
2. Jesus' condemnations of the Jewish leadership in chapter 23 is troublesome for many today, not least because the history of interpretation of this passage has fueled so much anti-Judaism over the centuries. Does this contradict the teaching in 5:44 to love one's enemies? How does Jesus' animosity in 23:1-36 cohere with the loving images and hope expressed in 23:37-39? Should we read these passages as critiques of established churches and/or Christian leaders today?
3. Contemporary readers often wonder how we ought to understand the eschatological language in the Olivet Discourse. The *parousia* no longer seems imminent, as Jesus insists it is in this speech. What does it mean for Christians today to remain vigilant and watchful?
4. What do you make of the harsh language of judgment in chapter 25? To what do you think the "eternal fire" (25:41) and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30) refer? Are these literal or metaphorical? Does God decide beforehand who will be

“sheep” and who will be “goats” or does this depend on how we treat those in need (25:31-46)?

Suggested Readings:

Gordon Leah, “Lifting the Curse: Reflections on Retribution and Restoration,” *European Journal of Theology* 22 (2013): 19-27.

Paul W. Meyer, “Matthew 21:1-11,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 180-185