

“What We Do Is What We Worship” based on Matthew 25:1-13 and Amos 5:18-24

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Nov. 12, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

When I was around 10 to 12 years-old, one summer I had visitors every Saturday morning. Now, to me, it seemed like the whole summer, but it was probably just a few weeks. Still, for a stretch, these two visitors came to my back porch around 9 am. They brought their bibles, and we would discuss different scriptures. They were probably in their mid-20s and were asking me, an 11-year-old, if I knew what was going to happen to me when the world ended, which they expected soon. This cataclysm seemed imminent to them, and they alone were on the right side.

I was familiar with the bible, having heard passages read in church every single Sunday, and knew more from my own reading, discussions with my mother, and Catholic school. The end times was one of my favorite topics, after all, as a dinosaur fan the Book of Revelation, has a multi-headed dragon – it was the first bible book I read start to finish. It’s scary.

But their focus was on both their desire for the end of the world, and their desire for me to be afraid, very afraid of that end. I remember having a hard time being afraid of end times. Between meetings, I talked with my mother, and she reminded me that whether the end of the entire world comes or not, the end of the world will come for everybody when we die. She asked why we should be more worried about the end of the world than our own death.

Armed with my newfound wisdom, I was eager for my Jehovah’s Witness friends to return. I had started to build up a whole collection of Watchtower leaflets and magazines. I believed I had the opportunity to drop my truth bomb on them, from my mom, but I’m not sure if I ever got the opportunity to do so. But I do know how the whole adventure ended. You see, my father went to the dump every Saturday and came home a little earlier than usual, saw these people talking with his son and verbally threatened them with firearms he did not actually own. They never returned.

I tell this story because with war on the Asian steps and in the Middle East, the prognosticators are on high alert, predicting the world’s end. They do so with absolute certainty. They give a plot of all the bible passages that clearly show us that the end is near, and the righteous will be vindicated, proven right by God. These new predictors, like those visitors at my door, have a vision, and in their vision, they are among those chosen righteous. And so, if God is in fact speaking through them on this matter, maybe it makes sense to listen to them and trust them. If what they say about this is true, then maybe what they say about just about everything is right. Perhaps they are, in fact, prophets, and prophets speak for God.

And yet I wonder, how can anyone be so certain? Now Jehovah’s witnesses founder Charles Taze Russell was certain in his predictions for the end of the world. William Miller and the Seventh Day Adventists were certain about theirs too. What of John Nelson Darby’s certainty with dispensationalism, and the certainty of many others, right up to Hal Lindsay, Jack VanImpe, Jerry Jenkins, or Jonathan Cahn. Many a prediction has been made, all have not happened. Yet, they speak with more certainty about the future than I can speak about a past I’ve lived, experienced and thought about a lot.

The truth is the words of Jesus at the end of our reading today, repeated from earlier in Matthew’s gospel, are that we should watch, for we do not know the hour or the day the Son of Man comes. In fact, the first time Jesus says this, he says that even he does not know. The Apostle Paul confesses

the same lack of foresight as Jesus. So then, how is it that we – and Christians throughout history – get sucked into all of the end of times talk, thinking we know something Paul nor Jesus knew?

Were Russell, Miller and Darby better connected to God's plan than Jesus? Are Lindsey, VanImpe, Jenkins, and Cahn more trustworthy than Paul? Heed Jesus's words which we didn't read from Matthew 24, "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many."

We may say that none of these said they were the Christ or Messiah, and that is true. But a lot of people do often claim to have an anointing. That's what 'christos' and 'messiach' mean. So, then Jesus says for us to "See that we are not troubled," even if there are wars and rumors of wars, famines and so much more. So what do we take from this? I guess we can just sit back, and go about our way as we always have, knowing that we are pretty astute in our bible reading, and put them aside among the really religious folk. We have reason in our handbag, not religion.

This, my friends, is the equal and opposite reaction to the many end times predictors. We are mistaken if we think Jesus's words must then mean that we just sit back, idly content in how we live, thinking that we are in relationship with him, because of what's in our minds, what we think we believe. After all, isn't that what we think belief and faith are: A mental choice of knowledge?

Beloved, our readings today say something very different. They tell us instead that we are what we do. Belief and faith are not mere mental choices, but are demonstrated in how we act, what we do. The word religion comes from a Latin root, meaning to bind. Our religion is the things to which we bind ourselves and then feel compelled to do and be. David Dark, the author of "Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious," defines religion then as "our perceived necessities." These are the things that we think are essential to our life, and others, creating a common ground, and a basis for relationship. But in the same way, what we bind ourselves to can divide, when the stakes we place on our beliefs, drive us to exclude others.

A recent study showed that for the first time in our nation's history, fewer than 50% of Americans are part of a religious house of worship. Yet, I would argue we are more religious than ever. It may not be in traditional houses of worship, but we bind ourselves to our many perceived necessities, and the communities that we have based on that binding. Think about your social media feed and how you have been concentrated into an ideological silo of people who agree with you mostly. Those you don't, you just hit ignore.

Think about the perceived necessities of the right or left politically, or the perceived necessities in being a fan of some team. If you don't wear a cheesehead, they're not going to win. Think of the perceived necessities of being a fan of a pop culture icon, or what is necessary for anything else we "follow" on social media.

We are what we do. When we feel compelled to comment and attack online, or when we feel compelled to respond and counter-attack, this is a religious practice. We feel bound to the community we are in, driven to oppose another viewpoint, or defend someone who holds our viewpoint from attack. This is not in and of itself wrong, but recognize its impact. Are our actions in this sphere going to be Christlike? Or will they reveal that we think we are the anointed?

The prophet Amos said, "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord – which is darkness." To those who count themselves among the righteous because of what side they are on, what they believe, and their perceived necessities are in religious worship. The Lord says through Amos, "I hate, I despise your feasts." At its most basic level, the word we translate as "hate" in Hebrew, means to "pull away," like when pricked by a thorn. God pulls away not because the feasts are bad, nor the assemblies, or even the sacrifices, after all, God commanded them.

No, the problem is that these are in and of themselves, the perceived necessities, when God's desire for them is to establish relationship with the people, for the people to extend relationship outward, creating reconciliation in their world. But instead, when the focus is on the ritual as perceived necessity, it becomes inwardly focused on purity and self-righteousness, preventing right judgement from running like water and preventing justice from flowing like a stream.

And so, Jesus presents us with two sets of bridesmaids, one set foolish, the other cautious. It's often translated as "wise," but it is not "sophia," meaning wisdom, but the same word used when Jesus said to be innocent as doves, wise as serpents. It is a word that means cautious, or careful, thinking about our actions before we act. The five are cautious because they plan for a whole night, rather than just the time they think it should take. They know the bridegroom is coming to open up the party and they will light the way no matter how long it takes.

But the foolish bring what they think they need and do not have a contingency plan. They rely on their own expectations, their own reason, or they expect others to pick up the slack for them. In truth, I feel a lot of kinship with the foolish maidens in today's reading. Let's be honest, it is hard to pray and to pray for something that means a lot, and never see any of the change we seek. It is hard to live with justice and right judgement for others, and then feel unfairly treated at times by others. Maybe it's just not getting a thank you, or worse, being taken advantage of.

If only our religious experience was like that of a football team: I wear my team's garb, and it brings luck or not, and at the end the game is decided. Our religious experience with politics is much the same: I repeat my team's talking points, push my team's literature, and it will win or discourage enough voters to win or lose. But in our walk of faith, we do what is right and wait, and too often we never see any results. We want to be accomplished and say, "it's done." But that's not what the Christian life is about. To say we are not about works is not to say we don't do works, but rather that no single work accomplishes salvation, which is given from God. Our works are our response.

I admit that this is a convicting scripture for me, because even I can be a foolish maiden. I am employed to study scripture and be "religious," but am I promoting justice? Or am I just doing everything I need to do to be a good employee of God and you? This isn't that I'm being hard on myself, it's the reality that all pastors face. Every scripture, book, or item we read, is seen in one light: "How can I apply this to what I'm doing in the church?" or "Who needs to hear this from me right now?"

And so I say how hard it is for me because it's hard for all of us. We've asked a lot from you as a church lately, whether it's Habitat or Samaritan's purse or one event or another and you have responded tremendously. But none of us can maintain just waiting all the time, filling our time with mission works and church events. How do we do that? And so like the maidens we can be impatient – "Well, I'm just going to do whatever for right now."

Beloved, these texts today are not meant to scare us, nor to affirm us exactly as we are. The Christian life is not about accomplishing salvation for ourselves, either by living the right life to earn God's love or by having the perfect belief. No, the Christian life is about living ready, trusting in God's grace, because it is by the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God who shared in our humanity as our brother, that we receive a share of his inheritance, which is God's abundant and eternal life.

We are what we do, and if we live life committed to the perceived necessities of this world, or the perceived necessities of checking every box to be seen as rightly worshiping, then we will not be prepared when the oil of these things runs low. Christ shared in our humanity so that we might share in God's life, and by his death, resurrection and ascension the Holy Spirit, is now living in and among us as God's temples.

God loves you. God truly loves you and there is nothing you do can earn God's love. It is freely given to us. Our choice is whether we want to live as if we know we are loved and let that define our life. Or we can dismiss God's love, or still act as if we need to earn God's love. Obviously the first is our choice: Know that you are loved and live in reflection of that love. We are what we do and if we act as God's beloved and share God's love, we have no need to fear the end of the world or our own death, nor should we welcome it either. Instead, rejoice that you are beloved and remember to be who you are. Amen.