

Sermons on Matthew

Deceiving Many

Matthew 24:4,5

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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And Jesus answered and said to them: __“_Take heed that no one deceives you. ⁻⁵⁻ For _many will come in My name, saying, ‘_I am the Christ,‘ _and will deceive many.”-
(Matthew 24:4, 5)

Introduction

The ‘All Things Good’ Principle

There are events which appear, to the untrained eye, both violent and disastrous.

Watching surgery on television (if you’re into that) can be unnerving. When I think of surgery I generally think of ‘sponge, clamp,’ not ‘drill, Skilsaw.’ The surgeon’s goal is to heal, but it appears fierce.

A common method of demolishing large buildings is implosion. Trained explosive experts strategically place their pyrotechnics to blow up (or blow in) a structure. That which, by outward observation, might appear to be an act of terrorism is actually a surgical act of demolition.

We see this principle at work in strategic fires set by fire departments, the strategic destruction of crops by farmers, the killing of diseased cattle by ranchers, and so on. In short, there are events which on the one hand give the appearance of something negative but deeper insight reveals their goal is something positive.

In His unfathomable wisdom and power, God has revealed in His Scriptures that this principle (maybe we can call it the ‘all things good’ principle) is at work in every last single event in creation.

By outward observation the crucifixion of Jesus was evil and barbaric, but it was God’s good plan of salvation. By outward observation the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers was conspiratorial cruelty, but it was God’s good plan to provide food during a famine.

When James tells us to “count it all joy” when we fall into various trials (James 1:2), he is not saying that we should just grin and bear some destructive and devil-winning event in our lives. He explains that trials are God’s good design to refine our faith. When Paul is buffeted by a messenger of Satan (2 Corinthians 12:7) he doesn’t evaluate the devil’s temporary victory but God’s good plan to deliver him from self-exaltation. When Paul tells us that we glory in tribulation (Romans 5:3), this is not understood as the suspension of God’s protection, but the means by which

God, in His good plan, advances our “perseverance, character and hope” (Romans 5:4).

It is important for Christians to understand that God’s plan of redemption includes events (I would argue the majority of events) that by outward observation (or from a certain vantage point) are dark and full of calamity and difficulty.

***I am the Lord, and there is no other; ⁷ I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and _create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things_.* (Isaiah 45:6b, 7)**

This chapter of Matthew’s gospel must be understood in light of this ‘all things good’ principle. This chapter is prophetic. Jesus is speaking of events that were about to take place in that “**generation**” (Matthew 23:36; 24:34). Because Jerusalem had reached a place of such abject darkness that their religious leaders were corrupt children of the devil (John 8:44) they were about to be judged. And this judgment (keeping in mind the ‘all things good’ principle) would be a source of great blessings to the world.

The kingdom of God would no longer be confined to one nation, Israel. It would become a universal kingdom which would cover the whole earth (Isaiah 11:9). Like a firework which for a time is a single streak of light barely noticeable, but at its explosion fills the sky with light, this event is the explosion God would ordain to begin to cover the dark earth with the light of Christ.

But how would God judge them?

This was no new prophecy. It was always God’s plan (His decrees are eternal) for this judgment to take place. Hundred of years prior to this Zechariah records a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem. He called it “**The day of the Lord**”:

Behold, __the day of the Lord is coming, And your __spoil will be divided in your midst. ² For __I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; The city shall be taken, The houses __rifled, And the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, But the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city (Zechariah 14:1, 2).

How would God judge Jerusalem? He would gather the nations to “**battle against**” them (verse 2). Compare this to the parallel passage in Luke.

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near (Luke 21:20).

God (very similar to the way He would use pagan armies to judge Israel in the Old Testament—see Habakkuk 1:5-11) would use (probably Rome) to surround and judge Israel.

One final point in this long introduction: Zechariah indicates that the remnant (those who had remained faithful) would not be “**cut off from the city.**” Matthew 24 (the Olivet Discourse) is the means by God keeps this promise. There would be a city, the City of God, “**the city which has foundations, __whose builder and maker is God**” (Hebrews 11:10), which would outlast Rome itself, a city which the faithful inhabit to this day.

The message of the Olivet Discourse is designed to protect the faithful from the same fate as the ungodly. It was asked why God would take so long (almost 40 years) to destroy the temple and rid the world of the smelling carcass of a corrupt religion (Matthew 24:28). The answer is that God is patient. He knows that even the elect can be deceived for a time (Matthew 24:24). He gave them forty years in the wilderness to repent (Deuteronomy 8:2) and He would give them forty years here.

Although this points to an immediate event, it also tells us of God’s judgment—both in history and eternity. In eternity God judges evil. And man’s only refuge from that judgment is Christ. God also judges evil in history (in observable events in time and space), and man’s only hope is to hear the council of Christ.

I believe the most immediate application this chapter has for us is to recognize these temptations and warnings are in a religious context, i.e. false christs, false prophets, religious persecution, religious betrayal and hatred all in the midst of national turmoil. The United States is not Israel, but in the same way we learn of God’s judgments in this passage, we also learn of Satan’s deceptions. Most importantly we learn of how to be wise and the call to persevere. This is the means by which the faithful keep from being cut off from the true city of God.

And Jesus answered and said to them: __“ Take heed that no one deceives you. ⁻⁵⁻ For _many will come in My name, saying, ‘ I am the Christ, _’ __and will deceive many.” (Matthew 24:4, 5)

As the Master Shepherd, Christ's first concern is that His sheep are not deceived (*planese*, which means to stray from the truth). The idea behind this word is not merely believing a lie, but at some level tasting the truth then being lead away from the truth. The church must be ever aware of this ungodly force within its own borders. Paul would warn the church at Ephesus:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 5:6).

We live in a culture where stadiums are being filled by those who desire to hear and are comforted by empty religious words. What makes this particularly pernicious is that people are under the impression that they have somehow fulfilled their religious duties by going to the self-help, prosperity teaching, mega-quasi-church where they receive tips on positive thinking and successful living.

We see this mentality in phenomena like the Prayer of Jabez, or the Forty Days of Purpose, or more recently with the most watched religious broadcast in America, Joel Osteen and the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. 42,000 attend per week and 7 million watch in over 100 countries.

Osteen states that

When we walk in His ways he'll take us places we never dreamed of... there are exciting things in your future...increase and promotion... God has already ordained before the foundation of the world [*note: a blatant misuse of a well-known passage in first chapter Ephesians*]... the right people, the right opportunity, time and chance are coming together for you... get your hopes up, start believing that your best days are ahead of you... if you're not making as much progress as you would like, here's the key... don't lose any ground. Keep a good attitude and do the right thing even when it's hard. When you do that you're passing the test and God promises that your marked moments are on their way.

Osteen views himself as a life coach. When asked why he doesn't mention sin he says,

Most people already know what they're doing wrong. A message [of sin] doesn't inspire anybody to rise higher.

But a message of sin does inspire (if the word can be used) people to trust in the One who rescues from sin. When asked why in his #1 *New York Times* best seller *Build a Better You* there is not one mention of God, not one mention of Jesus, just the 'message' of how to be positive toward yourself and building better relationships, instead of being horrified by that reality, Osteen simply states, "That's just my message. There are a lot better people qualified to say here's a book that's gonna explain the Scriptures to you. I don't think that's my gifting."

But how does that comport with the biblical mandate pastors are given to study and teach God's word? (2 Timothy 2:15; 4:2) Would it not be good stewardship, with the roughly \$100 million per year that that ministry brings in, to help equip Pastor Osteen to know and teach God's word?

I find myself in agreement with Michael Horton's assessment of Osteen when he says it's heresy to say that "God is our resource for getting our best life now. It makes religion about us and not about God."

Another deception comes in the form of false christs. Calvin informs us that this was quite common for the first century church.

For shortly after Christ's resurrection, there arose impostors, every one of whom professed to be *the Christ*.¹

Most false christs today (a David Koresh for example) are rejected almost immediately as crackpots, although Sun Myung Moon, who started the Unification Church, has one to three million members in 150 countries throughout the world. In a speech, on October 15th, 2003, at the Inaugural Assembly of the Headquarters of the Interreligious and International Peace Council in Seoul, Korea, the Reverend Moon stated that God gave him...

...the qualification to be the Savior, Messiah, returning Lord and True Parent who appears in the world as the substantial body of God Himself.

At least for the scope of my ministry (China notwithstanding) I am less concerned with false christs than I am with false presentations of

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Christ which are rampant in our current culture. And to dial this in a little tighter, the error is not so much what is said about Christ as much as what is simply left unsaid.

Does today's modern western evangelical believer know the offices of Christ? Do we understand why He had to be both Man and God? Why was it necessary that He be sinless? Do we understand what it means that He intercedes for us? What is the gospel?

Jesus teaches that there will be many false christs, and that they will deceive many. If the church is unwilling to present the Christ of the Scriptures, with all of His offices and attributes, how easy it is to be led to false representations and caricatures of Jesus.

The followers of Jesus wanted to know when the end of the age would be and what signs would trigger it. Jesus would answer their questions. But His primary concern is that they're not deceived. They would be the last building standing at the end of the age. At the end of any conflict, it is the Christian who should remain standing. They had a course to finish—he who endures.

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