Staying Warm in a Spiritually Cold World

Matt. 24 & 25 / 2 Timothy 3:1-5

5/16/21 (Sunday Night)

12 men gathered on the hillside overlooking Jerusalem. They were intensely curious, even somewhat unsettled, about what was coming. Some of the impending events their leader had warned them of were fairly clear in their minds, although questions of when and how these things would unfold troubled them. The nature and timing of other big events, though, were more muddled. They urgently needed to know more, because they understood enough to discern that the course of human history was hanging in the balance. So, when one asked their leader what they should be looking for, all eyes and ears intently turned in His direction.

On that spring day in A.D. 31, in what has come to be known as the Olivet Discourse or Prophecy, Jesus Christ began answering their question, “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” In doing so, He took them far past what they anticipated would happen in their lifetimes all the way into events that would affect you and your world today.

What could He possibly have forecast over 2,000 years ago that would be relevant to you and the way you live today?

Do we really have any control anyway? Prophecy has always intrigued people, and for good reason. After all, it’s the rare person who doesn’t have at least some curiosity about what the future holds. But those who are serious about following God, know that understanding Bible prophecy is crucial for more than just knowing tomorrow’s news—it’s vital to our motivation to stay close to God and spiritually strong.

However, a superficial look at this Prophecy in Matthew 24 and 25 (plus the parallel accounts in Luke 21 and Mark 13) could lead one to conclude that the events Jesus forecast are completely out of our control. There is virtually nothing you or I can do about famines, earthquakes and diseases breaking out. Nor can we influence the rise of religious, political, and military powers that will eventually, He guaranteed, bring the world to the brink of its destruction. Billions of people, including Christians, will stand by helplessly as these ordeals unfold.

But tucked between the troubling omen that “many false prophets will rise up and deceive many” (verse 11) and the promise that just before the end “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations” (verse 14) is a very relevant warning about something over which you and I do have control—at least in the way it impacts our lives!

Are we talking events or conditions? Most Bible prophecies are what we could call “event oriented”—that is, they speak to momentous, headline-grabbing world or national events that will come to pass.

More rare, however, are those we could call “condition oriented”—predictions of the moral and spiritual conditions that will shape our global, national or individual character. Not what will happen to us, but what we will be.

If we are unaware and unsuspecting, these traits will shape our mental, emotional, and spiritual outlooks and values. Conditions don’t tend to grab headlines because, unlike events that jump dramatically onto the world scene, these social conditions tend to creep slowly into our lives over long periods of time. They spread like a cancer, eating almost undetectably at the moral fiber of our lives and society. (The ‘ole warm the frog in the pan routine) If we are unaware and unsuspecting, these traits could & will shape our mental, emotional, and spiritual outlooks and values!

But, unlike event-oriented prophecies, conditions are things we can control, at least in terms of how they affect our lives and how we respond to the world around us.

So, amid Jesus’ long list of major events that would happen in the age leading to His return, He inserted a critical condition to watch for—a key summary of the moral and spiritual condition that would come to pervade society.

* Look at Matt. 24;12 - “**And because lawlessness will abound,” He said, “the love of many will grow cold”**

It’s amazing how one short sentence gives so much to ponder, especially considering the potential reach of this condition into our lives!

Some dismiss it lightly, though, saying the world has always had lawlessness. That’s true, but Jesus’ emphasis was on the time when it will abound, or multiply. And because of that increasing lawlessness, He stressed that we will see many people losing their love and affection and slipping into a spiritual and emotional coldness.

Even more striking is that the word love here is from the Greek agape—the highest form of love—the love of God. Jesus was warning that even those with the deepest type of love possible could see it erode. Is our world growing cold? Could it happen to you? Is it happening to you?

Jesus clearly understood cause-and-effect cycles: lawlessness leads to coldness, coldness spawns more lawless behavior, which in turn deepens human coldness. You get the picture, I’m sure, of why this problem accelerates in any society.

So exactly what was this “lawlessness” He talked about—a complete, chaotic breakdown of any social order? Not really. He was describing something far more common—sin!

The grinding down of the fundamental social principles and practices rooted in God’s law.

And how would this rising tide of lawlessness be demonstrated? What Jesus described only in a general way, the apostle Paul later explained in great detail, showing how we would see it exhibited.

In his second letter (2 Tim.3:1-5) to his protégé Timothy, Paul wrote, “But know this, that in the last days perilous times **will come**.” Sounds very similar to Jesus’ words, doesn’t it?

It’s an interesting word, perilous. We find the Greek word translated “perilous” here only one other time in the Bible, in Matthew 8:28, where it describes two demon-possessed men that Christ met coming out of tombs as being “exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass by.” Their ferocity, which perilously threatened the people, is described with the same word used in 2 Timothy 3:1. That Greek word also carries various shades of meaning, including hard to bear, dangerous or troublesome.

But perhaps the most striking explanation of “perilous” is found in the marginal note in the New King James Version where it calls it “times of stress.”

Such a strong expression conjures up images of the prophesied dangers of wars or earthquakes or famines, but no, Paul is not talking about those things. He is talking about the perils to the character of a people! Paul continues, listing 19 of these character-destroying traits. “Men [humans] will be,” he wrote:

* “Lovers of themselves”—self-centered, driven by selfish interests.
* “Lovers of money”—greedy, driven by possessions.
* “Boasters”—self-idolizers.
* “Proud”—me-first, ego-driven behavior.
* “Blasphemers”—disrespectful and disdaining of God.
* “Disobedient to parents”—disrespectful of fathers, mothers and the family structure.
* “Unthankful”—lacking common gratitude and recognition of blessings.
* “Unholy”—willingly living sinful lives.
* “Unloving”—without natural care for others.
* “Unforgiving”—holding grudges, focused on revenge.
* “Slanderers”—tearing down others verbally.
* “Without self-control”—not attempting to curb bad behavior.
* “Brutal”—violent and insensitive to brutality.
* “Despisers of good”—critical of and despising those who live by godly standards.
* “Traitors”—no sense of loyalty, willing to betray for self-interest.
* “Headstrong”—driven by self-will.
* “Haughty”—looking down on others, condescending.
* “Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”—choosing life’s pleasures even when they conflict with God’s principles.
* “Having a form of godliness but denying its power”—superficially religious, appearing righteous but with little spiritual substance.

All of these are forms of sin—spiritual lawlessness. And think about this—every one of them creates stress in our lives by damaging our relationship with either God or one another. Take any one of these 19 and ask yourself, what happens to people when they are this way? How do they act? How do their actions affect those around them? How do these traits damage their own character?

Such behavior inevitably turns people cold. Those who behave these ways are already cold toward others, and those on the receiving end of such behavior tend to react coldly themselves. It’s hard to feel warmhearted toward people acting like this!

Given the gravity of both Jesus’ and Paul’s words, can we somehow “take the temperature” of today’s society to see where we are and where we are heading? Maybe all it takes is answering these questions:

* Do you see these 19 conditions at work in the world around you today?
* Do you see these conditions growing, lessening, or staying the same?
* What happens to someone who begins to take on these behaviors?
* How do any of these conditions in people affect others around them?
* How do these conditions threaten your life? What are the perils to you?
* How can you resist falling into these conditions?

So, to keep us “Spiritually Warm” in a “Spiritually Cold” world, let’s look briefly at how to keep from growing cold:

Both Jesus and Paul gave several clear directives about how to live in such a world.

**Point 1: Turn away**

*“From such people turn away!”* said Paul emphatically (2 Timothy 3:5).

* If we do not recognize and stop associating with people who live this way, these traits will creep into our lives!

**Point 2: Dare to be different**

* Paul’s words to Timothy are no less timely for us today. John R.W. Stott explained it well in his book Guard the Gospel: “In this paragraph Paul twice addresses Timothy with the same two little Greek monosyllables su de. They come at the beginning of verses 10 and 14 … and should be translated ‘But as for you. …’
* In stark contrast to the contemporary decline in morals, empty show of religion and spread of false teaching, Timothy is called to be different, and if necessary to stand alone.”
* Su de is used again in 2 Timothy 4:5, where Paul “repeats his call to Timothy to be different. He must not take his lead from the prevailing passions of the day.”

Paul was like a spiritual father to Timothy, so it seems Paul’s use of “but as for you” would cut straight to Timothy’s heart. But his letter was preserved for us. We need to apply Paul’s word **“but as for you”** statements personally and apply them to our hearts?

**Point 3: Know and live by God’s Word**

Echoing Jesus’ warning, Paul also told Timothy, “But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.”

Then he made it personal— *“But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:13-15). In a cold world, knowing and living by the Scriptures is key to staying spiritually centered.

**Point 4: Watch your step**

Jesus, in the Olivet Prophecy, told His disciples, “Take heed to yourselves” lest you fall into the same way of thinking and behaving as the world around you—“lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly.”

In other words, be on guard and never take anything for granted. The time leading up to His return “will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth,” He warned. “Watch therefore and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

We need to develop in us a spirit of “Awareness” that we would not be deceived by what is here and what is coming.

* Matt. 24:4-5 - *And Jesus answered and said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.*
* 1 John 3:7 - *Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He (Jesus) is righteous.*
* Colossians 2:8**-** *See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*

Closing:

We need to “Avoid the creeping chill”. We are in many ways living in times vastly different from that of the 12 men listening intently to Jesus on the Mount of Olives, but His words are even more foreboding for us today than for them. We are much nearer the end of the age, and every day draws us closer to Christ’s return! Society around us is going its own way, and its character will inevitably grow colder and colder as it moves farther and farther from God. Yes, prophesied major world events are yet to dramatically unfold, but perhaps the greatest danger to each of us individually is the creeping influence of lawlessness and the subsequent chilling of love for God and one another.

The root cause of a world growing cold is spiritual lawlessness, and if we can see it happening and know it can slip into our lives if we are not careful—isn’t it sensible to do something about it? Let us continue to stay close to the “Fire” during these “Cold” days…Let us “Draw Nigh unto the Lord & allow the “FIRE” of God not just keep us warm but burn in and through us to a cold world around about us!