

## Watch

This is the final chapter of part five, in which we have been trying to consider the main commands of Jesus as found in the gospels. This is not to say that all the main commands have been covered in this section. Some, such as "Repent", appeared in part four. Others, such as "Abide in me", will be covered in part six, as we consider the promise of Jesus being with his followers until the end.

For reasons of space, we chose not to cover the sermon on the mount. This contains a number of instructions, which should be taken seriously by believers. There is another group of commands too which we will not attempt to cover, namely the ones which were made to individual disciples rather than the group, and which appear not to apply today.

One such example was the occasion when Peter was sent to the sea of Galilee, with the instruction that the first fish he caught would have a coin in its mouth, which would pay the temple tax for Jesus and Peter (Matt 17:24-27). This story, coupled with the remark, "Do whatever he tells you", made by Jesus' mother Mary to the servants at the wedding (John 2:5), might have provided another chapter, along the lines that it is important to obey Jesus even if his commands appear contrary to reason.

There are probably further lines of thought, in line with our theme, that we could have helpfully pursued. Some may say, therefore, that our selection of the commands has been arbitrary, and lacks completeness. As a result, the book may be thought to be biased.

This is an important consideration. Our aim has been to look at the commands that Jesus seems to have cared most about, and gave most emphasis to. We wanted to retune to the heart of Jesus' message. It is therefore important to ask whether we are presenting a fair picture.

So that readers can judge for themselves whether or not we have been fair to the main emphases, they should see if there are other key commands given by Jesus in the gospels that have been omitted. To assist in checking whether or not particular themes have been dealt with, there is an index of the 172 commands that I found in the gospels, at the end of this book. It is provided to make it easier for readers to make up their own mind on this important matter.

This discussion of possible bias highlights a final area which needs to be addressed in this section, and that is the concern that the disciples were to guard against being taken in. "Watch out", said Jesus, "that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming 'I am he,' and 'The time is near.' Do not follow them (Luke 21:8)." The disciples were also to watch carefully, because Jesus himself would return, and they might not be ready (Matt 24:42, 25:13, Luke 12:35-40). It would be easy to be asleep, or with hearts weighed down by dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, rather than awake (Mark 13:36, Luke 21:34-36).

It seems from all this that Jesus was aware that his followers would show a tendency to miss what was happening, as the end of the age drew near. On the one hand, many would be carried away by false teachings. On the other, they would tend to miss what the real Jesus was doing, especially the moment when Christ would return.

Soon after Jesus had given these warnings, when they came to the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus once again urged his disciples to watch and pray, so that they would not fall into temptation (Mark 14:38). Sadly, they failed to do so. They were not at all aware of what was happening, even though Jesus himself had told them to stay awake and pray, because a testing time was coming. As a result, they were soon scattered and demoralised.

This scene can almost be taken as a visual aid of what can be expected among believers at the end of the age. It appears that when Christ finally returns, there is a danger that Christians will miss him altogether, either by going after a false Messiah figure, or by missing the real one, despite the fact that his coming will be like lightning in the east which is visible in the west (Matt 24:27). Through not being sufficiently alert, believers could end up in a similar state to those first disciples after the events at Gethsemane.

Those who believe Jesus is the Messiah need to take these warnings seriously. There are two main points to be made. Firstly, Jesus' words relate to how we opened this chapter. For our own

protection, we cannot afford to have an inaccurate picture of the heart of the gospel. In the last chapter we compared Christians to sailing boats. It is vital that once on the open sea, believers are not simply "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (Eph 4:14)."

As we said in the Introduction, this book is presented in the belief that the words of Jesus are to be taken at face value. We felt that special attention should be paid to any and every indication that Jesus gave of what his disciples were to do and to be. So if you can detect bias, then please write to the publishers. Then any faults can be put right in any further edition, or an apology printed in the Christian press. It is not our aim to deceive, but rather to please the Lord by taking all his teaching seriously.

In an attempt to guard against error, we could now spend time discussing some of the various false teachings that are around. However, while this might be of limited value, it seems more helpful to concentrate on the true teaching. It is said that people who are trained to detect forged bank notes operate not out of a knowledge of forgeries, but out of their familiarity with the genuine article. They spend long hours closely studying the official banknote. This enables them to see any differences in the forgeries they encounter.

So with us. For all our efforts, there are doubtless imperfections in the way the arguments have been presented, and the emphases of the text may have been misunderstood. In order not to be deceived, readers need to study the gospels closely for themselves, asking whether the line taken here is consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus. These issues should not be left to chance. To do this is to follow in the footsteps of the Jews at Beroea. The result of their searching the Scriptures was that many became believers (Acts 17:11).

Secondly, it appears that the area of most deception is in recognising the true Messiah, and those who speak for him. The statement that many would come in Jesus' name, claiming to be the Messiah, used to puzzle me, since I have seldom come across people claiming to be a Messiah. I can think of just three alive today who have made that claim. That did not seem to be many to me.

However, it seems that the group Jesus was referring to is much wider than that. People do not need to actually claim to be a Messiah to be a Messiah-like figure; all they need to do is to present a way of salvation. Our world is full of people telling us variations of the theme, "Do this or that, and your life will be fulfilled."

It is true that many such people may not actually appear to be offering a way to God. But "Life in all its fullness" (John 10:10), can apparently be achieved through weight-loss, diet control, buying consumer goods, travelling to exotic islands for holidays, and whole hosts of activities, judging from the advertisements that bombard us daily. It has to be said that many people appear to follow their teachings. Sales figures tend to confirm that advertisements work.

What concerns us most are claims in the Christian world, along the lines of "Do this and you will live (Luke 10:28)", or "Believe this and you will be saved (Acts 16:31)." Such claims are numerous. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that almost every time a preacher stands up, he is either a genuine ambassador for Christ (2 Cor 5:20), in that he accurately presents the teaching of Jesus, or he is in effect speaking on behalf of a false Messiah, in that his teaching runs counter to what Jesus actually taught. Such a person may appear to be speaking in the name of Jesus, but the reality is different; if his words are compared with the gospel teaching, a difference may be noted. Those who follow him will be led astray.

This insight places a great responsibility on every Christian assembly where teaching takes place. Those who desire to speak in Christian gatherings need to remember the advice of James; "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1)." Likewise, the hearers need to weigh carefully everything that is said, and not to swallow it all down regardless (1 Cor 14:29). Scripture warns us that there is a danger that to suit our own desires, we will gather round us teachers who say what our itching ears want to hear (2 Tim 4:3). This implies that false teaching need not appear unpleasant. On the contrary, it is likely to prove popular. Further, even the presence of signs and wonders does not in itself mean that believers should trust what is said (see Matt 7:15-23).

In particular, we should be aware that it is almost always possible to come up with plausible arguments for a line of action. Human beings can often be talked into doing what they would otherwise not do. So we ought to be cautious about what teaching we absorb. The only safe course is to compare the line of teaching that is presented with what Jesus said in the gospels. As Paul put it, we are to beware of being taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Col 2:8).

In warning his readers of false teachers, John spoke of the many Antichrists that were around (1 John 2:18). The prefix 'anti-' suggests people who are against Christ. However, the meaning of the Greek word *antechristos* is not so much one who is opposed to Christ as one who takes the place of Christ. This is much more subtle. There is no overt statement "Follow me rather than Jesus"; instead, the body of teaching that is presented takes the place of Christ and his teaching. When such teaching is presented, the effect is that somehow or other, Jesus himself is elbowed out into the wings.

I believe we need to be thoroughly humble at this point, and recognise that many of us have a pronounced tendency to be misled in this kind of way. Looking back, I am aware of times when I have accepted false teaching, and gone on to mislead others in turn, with the best of intentions. I thought I was doing well at the time. Now I realise that my grasp of the truth was inadequate, for one reason or another.

The solution for this failing, once it is realised, is first of all to repent, and then to heed the word Jesus gives; "Watch and pray." This practice was the task of the watchman on the city wall in ancient Israel (Ezek 3:17). His aim was to give advance warning of who was approaching, whether friend or foe. This function is related to the role of prophecy, which we will discuss in the next section. But for now, we may say that Christians are to keep their spiritual antennae up.

There are two main ways in which we can do this. Firstly, the Psalmist wrote of God's instructions, "By them is your servant warned (Ps 19:11)." Knowing God through the Scriptures will protect believers from deception. We will devote a chapter to the role of Scripture in part six. Secondly, Jesus says we are to pray. This too we will cover in a later chapter. We are now ready to appreciate more fully the glorious promise our overall text makes, that Jesus is with his followers, right to the end; there is no darkness, no confusion or deceit that removes his presence, no opposition, no spiritual power that cuts us off from his love (Rom 8:38-39). When it comes to avoiding deception, the role of believers is to make sure that they stay in touch with Jesus, by means of the Bible and prayer.

We will end this chapter with a sad picture. Imagine Sean, who once heard the good news that one of the National Parks on the West Coast of the USA was highly beautiful, and well worth a visit. Over the course of months, he counted the cost, and made the decision to go and see for himself. He booked his holiday in advance, and finally the awaited day arrived. After a long flight, and a night in a hotel, he set off in his hired car, and on arrival, drove into the entrance of the park.

To begin with, there was not much to see, but after driving along the steadily climbing road for some miles, he reached a view point. There were no other people there. He parked and climbed out of the car, almost overwhelmed with the beauty of what he saw. For a long time he gazed at the wonderful mountains. He had soon decided that the view was well worth the effort of coming.

At some point, he gradually became aware that other cars driving up after him from below were not stopping. This really upset him - how could they ignore such beauty? He turned towards the road behind, and watched them driving past. Soon he started trying to flag down the cars, but they would not stop. Sean always did find it difficult to be ignored by other people. His efforts to persuade the other cars to stop became more frantic, yet still they drove past. Even when he managed to get close enough to bang on the roof of one with his fist, it still drove on. Sean was filled with anger, and was most  
upset.

What Sean did not know was that a mile or two further along the road, round a few more bends, the view was even better than before. Most of the other drivers knew that, which is why they

wouldn't stop. Some were just following the crowd, and found the better view point by accident. Others again were intending to go further up and further in, where it was better still.

After travelling all that way, Sean ended up with his back towards the view he had come to see, shouting at car drivers. The sad thing is that Sean is not alone; some of us are like him. We began by being thrilled with the beauty of the Lord, but as the years have passed, some of us have ended up by being frustrated with the fact that other people refuse to see things the way we do. This makes us upset and angry. We have hardly noticed that somewhere in the process, we have actually turned our backs on the Lord. The deception is this; our particular grasp of doctrine, which by definition can never be complete in this life, has become an idol for us (1 Cor 13:9). We have fallen into insisting that others see things exactly as we see them.

Sean's pleasure in the view was largely spoiled because of his own difficulties over being ignored. Much of the solution for Sean was to turn back towards the beautiful mountains. Believers do well to heed this. Since it is evidently so easy to be deceived by false Messiahs, declared or otherwise, we need to be resolved to go on putting the Lord first, focussing on him. If we don't, our own weaknesses may prove a hindrance to us. It is as we draw near to him in prayer and adoration that we are safe. God will then preserve us from becoming obsessed with our own set of half truths to the exclusion of the greater and better vision that he has to show us.

In short, we never fully grasp the truth in this life. The process of absorbing truth, and rejecting error, is never complete. We need to press on like Paul (Phil 3:12). It has been said that people have reached old age when they stop learning. Let us therefore keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and so not become prematurely bowed in a stoop, or hard in the arteries, in the inner man, but rather mount up with renewed youth (Isa 40:31, Heb 12:1). We learned earlier that the word disciple means learner; the wise person is always ready to learn more.

We will focus on our relationship with Jesus in the final part of the book. In part five, we have attempted to discuss the commands of Jesus. The going has been tough at times. But now we come to the best part of all, that Jesus is with his followers today. That makes it all possible, and worthwhile.