Jesus made daily visits to Jerusalem during the few days between the anointing and the Passover. He went with His disciples and returned to Bethany in the evenings. During these times, He did a lot of speaking in public and in private. His topics included issues that were in line with His feelings and situation, like the sin of the Jewish nation (especially its religious leaders), the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of the world. The record of His sayings during these last days fills five chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. This is proof that they made deep impressions on the minds of the Twelve.

These sayings form the dying testimony of the “Prophet of Nazareth.” One of the most prominent ones is the great discourse that He delivered against the scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem. This powerful message had been preceded by various encounters between Jesus and His enemies. These were preliminary skirmishes that formed the prelude to a great conflict. Jesus had always been victorious in these petty fights and had overwhelmed His opponents with confusion. They had asked Him about His authority for taking on Himself the role of a reformer when He cleared the temple precincts of merchants. He had silenced them by asking their opinion of John’s mission and by giving, within their hearing, the parables of *The Two Sons*, *The Vine-growers*, and *The Rejected Stone* (Mt. 21:23-46). In these parables, their hypocrisy, unrighteousness, and ultimate damnation were vividly depicted. They had tried to catch Him in a trap by asking Him a question about the tax paid to the Roman government. He had easily freed Himself by simply asking for a penny. He pointed to the emperor’s head on it and demanded of His assailants, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” After they replied, “Caesar’s,” He gave His judgment in these terms: “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:15-22). Now they had been foiled twice. So the Pharisees, along with their friends, the Herodians, let the Sadducees have a shot at Him. Usually the Sadducees were the enemies of the Pharisees, but now they were allies against Christ. So they tried to entrap Jesus on the subject of the resurrection, only to be disgracefully defeated. After that, the Pharisaic brigade returned to the charge and through the mouth of an attorney, who was not yet totally corrupted, asked, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Mt. 22:34-40). Jesus gave a direct and solemn reply to this question. He summed up the whole law by teaching love to God and love to mankind. His questioner was entirely satisfied. Then, growing impatient about
answering more of their petty questions, He sounded an alarm and gave the signal for a grand offensive attack by asking the question, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” (Mt. 22:42). After their reply, He took the opportunity to quote the opening verse of David's martial psalm and asked them to reconcile it with their answer (vss. 43-45). It appeared that He was fighting the Pharisees with their own weapons and spinning a theological puzzle for them. But in reality, He was reminding them of who He was and letting them know about the destruction that was predicted for those who set themselves against the Lord's anointed.

Then David's Son and David's Lord proceeded to fulfill the prophetic word (Ps. 110) and to make a footstool of the men who sat in Moses' seat (vs. 1) by delivering His discourse. In it, the Pharisees are placed in a moral dilemma. After all these years, they are still mocked and ridiculed about it. Jesus pronounces a severe and unrelenting sentence on the pharisaic character. It is justified by the facts of the situation and is approved by the conscience of all true Christians (Mt. 23). This anti-pharisaic speech may be regarded as the final, decisive, comprehensive, dying testimony of Jesus against the most deadly and damning form of evil that prevailed in His age, or that can prevail in any age - religious hypocris. It forms a part of the Righteous One's witness-bearing on behalf of the truth. His disciples are expected to say “Amen” without wavering. For the spirit of moral resentment is as essential in Christian ethics as the spirit of mercy. If anyone regards Jesus' anti-pharisaic defense of the gospel history as something to be ashamed of, or as a blemish to be apologized for, or as something that political correctness requires him to avoid (a practice too common in the religious world), he cannot be cleared of the suspicion of having more sympathy in his heart with the men who were responsible for the Lord's crucifixion than with the Lord Himself. Blessed is the one who is not ashamed of Christ's most severe words. This person is far from being bothered by those bold, prophetic words. In fact, he has found them to be an aid to his faith when he has faced a crisis in his own spiritual journey. He has demonstrated that there is an identity between the moral standards of the Founder of the faith and his own. Jesus' words help him to see that what he may have mistakenly thought was Christianity (or what he claimed to be Christianity) was not that at all. Rather, it was only a modern reproduction of a religious system which the Lord Jesus Christ could not tolerate, nor could He be on civil terms with it. Blessed is the church that sympathizes with and applies Christ's words of warning in the opening of this discourse against the ambition of priests and pastors. This is the source of the spiritual tyrannies and hypocrisies that He denounced. Every church needs to be on its guard against this evil spirit. The government of the Jewish church, which was theoretically theocratic, degenerated finally into Rabbinism. And it is quite possible for a church which has for its motto, “One is your Master, even Christ,” to fall into a state of abject subjection to the power of ambitious church leaders.
The Critics’ Views

We do not admit, for a moment, that there is anything in these rebukes against hypocrisy that demand an apology. Nevertheless, we must refer to the view that some critics (e.g., Renan) have taken of them. We are told that these speeches are the rash, unqualified utterances of a young man whose spirit had not been mellowed by age and the experience of the world; that he was poetic, and therefore irritable, impatient, and unpractical; that his temperament was that of a Jew - gloomy, and prone to bitterness when controversy arose. These critics also maintain that as Jesus was provoked by persevering opposition, He lost self-control and abandoned Himself to anger. His bad mood had reached such a state that He was guilty of actions that seemed absurd, such as that of cursing the fig tree. In fact, He became reckless about the consequences of His actions and even seemed to court those that were disastrous. Then, weary of conflict, He used violent language to foster a crisis and provoke His enemies to put Him to death.

In Defense of Jesus

These blasphemies against the Son of Man are as unfounded as they are harmful. The last days of Jesus' life were certainly full of intense excitement. But to anyone who is honest in his thinking, there are no traces of passion that can be discerned in His conduct. All of His recorded words that He spoke during those days are in a high key. They are a perfect “fit” for someone whose soul was animated by majestic feelings. Every sentence is eloquent; every word speaks. Everything spoken throughout this time is natural and appropriate to the situation. Even when the terrible attack on the religious leaders of Israel begins, we are awestruck as we listen. But we are not shocked. We feel that the speaker has a right to use this type of language, that what He says is true, and that all is said with commanding authority and dignity. All of this was appropriate for the Messianic King. By the time Jesus finishes, we can breathe a little easier. We sense that a delicate though necessary task has been performed with wisdom and faithfulness. Deep and undisguised abhorrence is expressed in every sentence. It would be difficult for any ordinary man (even for an extraordinary one) to have these feelings without also having anger - and anger that does not work the righteousness of God. But in the dislikes of the Divine Being, the weakness of passion cannot find a place. His abhorrence may be deep, but it is also always calm. We challenge unbelievers to point out a single feature in this discourse that is inconsistent with the hypothesis that the Speaker is divine. Even if His divinity is left out of the picture, and one criticized His words with a freedom that was not restrained by reverence, we can see no traces in them of a man that is carried along by a storm of anger. After we have conducted a strict search, we do not find any loose expressions or passionate exaggerations. Instead, we find a style that is remarkable for artistic precision and accuracy. We see the pictures of the following: the ostentatious, position-seeking, title-loving rabbi; the hypocrite, who makes long prayers and devours widows’ houses; the zealot, who goes to extraordinary trouble to make converts, but makes those converts worse instead of better men; the Jesuitical scribe, who teaches that the gold
of the temple is a more sacred, binding thing to swear by than the temple itself; the Pharisee, whose conscience is strict or lax, depending on how convenient it is to him; the white-washed sepulchers that look good from the outside but are filled with dead men's bones; the men whose piety manifests itself by murdering living prophets and robbing the sepulchers of dead ones. All of these are moral pictures which will stand the minutest inspection of criticism. They are not drawn by an irritated, defeated man, who feels and resents the evil deeds of His adversaries, but by One who has gained such a complete victory that He can make sport of His foes. Whatever else may be said, He runs no risk of losing self-control.

**The Purpose of Jesus’ Discourse**

The purpose of the discourse is an adequate defense against the charge that Jesus was bitter. Jesus’ main purpose was not to expose the blind guides of Israel but to save the people from delusion. These people were being led to ruin. The audience consisted of the disciples and the multitude who gladly listened to Him. Many of the blind guides were probably present. But it would not make any difference to Jesus whether they were or not, because He did not speak in two different ways about mankind - one right to their face, and the other behind their backs. It is said of Demosthenes, the great Athenian orator, and the determined opponent of Philip of Macedon, that he completely broke down in Philip’s presence when he first appeared before him as an ambassador from his native city. But one greater than Demosthenes is here. Jesus’ sincerity and courage are as marvelous as His wisdom and eloquence. He says what He thinks about the religious rulers of the people where they can hear it plainly. Still, in this situation, the parties He addresses were not the leaders of the people, but the people themselves. And it should be noted that Jesus used discretion in the counsel which He gave them. He told them that what He objected to was not so much the teaching of their guides, as their lives. They could follow all their precepts with little risk. But it would be fatal to follow their example. How many reformers in similar circumstances would have combined doctrine and practice together in one single denunciation! This kind of moderation is not characteristic of a man who is in a rage.

But the best clue of all concerning the spirit of Jesus is the manner in which His discourse ends: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!” (Mt. 23:37). This would be a strange ending for someone who is filled with angry passion! O Jesus, Jesus! How You have risen above the petty thoughts and feelings of ordinary people! Who is able to fathom the depths of Your heart? What mighty waves of righteousness, truth, compassion, and sorrow roll through Your heart!

After Jesus uttered that piercing cry of grief, He left the temple and, as far as we know, never returned. His last words to the people of Jerusalem were: “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate. For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Mt. 23:38,39). On the way from the city to Bethany, by the Mount of Olives, the rejected Savior once again alluded to its coming destruction. The light-
hearted disciples had pointed out the strength and beauty of the temple buildings to Jesus. They could see them clearly. But Jesus was too sad and serious to admire mere architecture. He replied in the spirit of a prophet: “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (Mt. 24:2).

When they arrived at the Mount of Olives, the disciples sat down to take a leisurely view of the majestic buildings they had been talking about. Their thoughts and feelings were vastly different from Jesus’! The Twelve could only see with the physical eye. Their Master saw with the inward eye of prophecy. They can see nothing in front of them but the beautiful stones. Jesus sees the people profaning the temple on the inside. Greedy traders were within the sacred precincts. Religion was corrupted by showiness. This made the poor widow, giving her two mites into the treasury in godly sincerity, a rare and pleasing exception. The disciples are only thinking about the present. Jesus looks forward to an approaching destruction. It is horrible to think about. Without a doubt, He looks backwards too. He sees the long and diverse history through which the house of God had passed. Once it had been revered; now it was polluted. The disciples are elated with pride as they gaze on the national structure. It is the glory of their country. So they are happy - just like unthinking people are prone to be. Jesus’ heart is heavy with the sadness that comes with wisdom and foreknowledge, and with a love that would have saved. Now, He can do nothing but weep - and proclaim the awful words of destruction.

The End of Jerusalem, The End of the World
Yet, with all their thoughtlessness, the Twelve could not quite forget those dark predictions of their Master. The strange words haunted their minds and made them curious to know more. Therefore, they came to Jesus (at least some of them did) - Mark mentions Peter, James, John, and Andrew (Mk. 13:3-4) - and asked two questions: (1) “When will Jerusalem be destroyed?” and (2) “What will be the signs of His coming, and of the end of the world?” The men thought that the two events referred to in the questions - the end of Jerusalem, and the end of the world - would happen at the same time. It was natural for them to think this way and was not a unique mistake. Specific and partial judgments tend to get mixed up with the universal ones in peoples’ imaginations. Therefore, almost every great disaster that shocks people leads to expectations that the last days have come. When his mind was clouded by the dark shadow of the present tribulation, Luther remarked: “The world cannot stand long, perhaps a hundred years at the outside. At the last will be great alterations and commotions, and already there are great commotions among men. Never had the men of law so much occupation as now. There are vehement dissensions in our families, and discord in the church” (Luther's Table Talk, p.325). In apostolic times, Christians expected the immediate coming of Christ with confidence and passion. Some even neglected their secular businesses. This also happened near the end of the tenth century when people allowed churches to fall into disrepair, because everyone thought the end of the world was near.
In reality, the judgment of Jerusalem and that of the world were to be separated by a long interval. Therefore, Jesus treated the two things as distinct in His prophetic discourse. He gave separate answers to the two questions which the disciples had combined into one. The question about the end of the world was answered first (Mt. 24:4-14).

**Six Precursors to the End of the World**

The answer He gave to this question was general and negative. He did not give a specific time, but in essence He said, “The end will not come until certain things have taken place.” He specifies six things that must happen, the first being the appearance of false Christs (Mt. 24:5). He assured His disciples that there would be many of these; and they would deceive many. In fact, several quack Messiahs did appear, even before the destruction of Jerusalem. They preyed on the people’s desire for deliverance just like quack doctors do sick patients. They deceived many people. Unfortunately, in times like the ones described, it is very easy to do. But none of those who had been previously instructed by Christ were among those who were deceived. Christ had taught them to regard the appearance of pseudo-Christs merely as one of the signs of an evil time. These deceivers would be a preservative against delusion.

The second sign is “wars and rumors of wars” (vs. 6). Nation must rise against nation. There must be times of upheaval and termination, declines and falls of empires. New kingdoms would rise on top of the ruins of the old. This second sign would be accompanied by a third. Turmoil would occur in the physical world and would be symbolic of those in the political. Famines, earthquakes, diseases, etc. would occur in different places (vs. 6,7).

And yet no matter how dreadful these things are, it is only the beginning of sorrows. Nor would the end come until those signs repeated themselves over and over again. No one would be able to tell from these phenomena that the end would be now. He could only infer that it was not yet (vs. 8).

Next in the list come persecutions, with all the moral and social phenomena that happen during times of persecution (vs. 9). Christians must undergo a discipline of hatred among the nations because of the Name they bear. They are the ones blamed for all the disasters which happen to the people among whom they live. The times must come when, if the Tiber floods Rome, if the Nile does not water its fields, if drought, earthquakes, famines, or plagues visit the earth, the cry of the people will be, “The Christians to the lions!”

Along with persecutions, as the fifth precursor to the end, there would come a sifting of the church (Mt. 24:10). Many would break down or turn traitors. Many animosities, divisions, and heresies would spring up, and each one would be named by its own false prophet. These evils
would be so prevalent in the church that they would cause much spiritual declension. “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Mt. 24:12).

The last thing that must happen before the end comes is the evangelization of the world (vs. 14). Once this is achieved, the end will finally arrive. From this sign, we can guess that the world will still be here for a long time. According to the law of historical probability, it will take a long time before the Gospel is preached to all people. Diligent Christians or enthusiastic students of prophecy who think otherwise must remember that sending a few missionaries to an unevangelized country does not satisfy the prescribed condition. It cannot be said that the Gospel has been preached to a nation (so that a basis for moral judgment is formed) until it has been preached to all of the people. This has never been done for all the nations. At the present rate of progress, it is not likely to be accomplished for centuries to come.

The End of Jerusalem

After Jesus quickly sketched an outline of the events that had to precede the end of the world, He addressed the more special question about the destruction of Jerusalem. He could now speak on that subject with more freedom. He had guarded against the idea that the destruction of the holy city was a sign of His own immediate final coming. “Therefore when,” He began. These were the introductory words that were used to answer their first question. “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Mt. 24:15,16). The abomination of desolation was the Roman army with its eagles - abominable to the Jew. It was desolating to the land. When the eagle appeared, all would have to flee for their lives. Resistance would be futile. Obstinacy and bravery would do absolutely nothing. The calamity would be so sudden that there would be no time to save anything. It would be the same as when a house catches fire. People are happy to escape with their lives (Mt. 24:17,18). It would be a terrible time of tribulation unparalleled before or after (vs. 21). Woe to poor nursing mothers in those horrible days, and to those who were pregnant! What horrible and inhumane things awaited them! The calamities that were coming would not spare anyone, not even Christians. They would only find safety by fleeing. They would have good reason to be thankful that they escaped at all. But their flight, even though it was unavoidable, might be more or less difficult according to their circumstances. They should pray for what might seem to be small mercies, even if they could be relieved from fleeing to the mountains in the winter time, when it is cold and comfortless, or on the Sabbath, the day of rest and peace (vss. 19-20).

These awful days that were approaching would be intolerable by mortal people if they were not shortened for the “sake of the elect” (vs. 22). After Jesus gave this brief but graphic sketch of these days, He repeated His warning against deception. It was almost as if He was concerned that His disciples would be distracted by these calamities and think: “Surely this is the end.” He
told them that violence would be followed by apostasy and falsehood. It would be as great a trial in one way as the destruction of Jerusalem would be in another. False teachers would arise. They would be believable and almost deceive even the elect. The devil would appear as an angel of light. He would be in the desert as a monk or in the shrine as an object of superstitious worship. But whatever people might pretend to be, the Christ would not be there. His appearance would not take place then either. He would not come at any fixed, predictable time. Rather, He would come suddenly, unexpectedly, like the lightening flashing in the heavens. When moral corruption had attained its full development, then judgment would come (vss. 23-28).

In the remaining part of the discourse, the end of the world seems to be tied in to the destruction of the holy city (vs. 29). If a long period of time was to pass first, the perspective that the prophetic picture gives seems to be faulty. The mountains of the eternal world that are located in the far distance are visible above and beyond the near hills of time in the foreground. These mountains lack the dim-blue haze that helps the eye realize how far off they are. This omission in Matthew’s narrative, which we have been using for our text, is furnished by Luke. He interprets the tribulation in such a way that he includes the subsequent, long-lasting dispersion of Israel among the nations (21:24). The phrase he uses to describe this period is significant. He implies that it will be a long period of time. It is “the times of the Gentiles.” The expression means the time when the Gentiles would have their opportunity to enjoy divine grace. It would correspond to the time the Jews enjoyed the gracious visitation by God. Jesus referred to this in His lament over Jerusalem (Lk. 19:44). There is no reason to believe that Luke coined these phrases. They bear the stamp of genuineness on them. But if we assume that Jesus Himself spoke about a time of merciful visitation on the Gentiles, then it follows that in His eschatological discourse He gave clear hints about a lengthened period during which His gospel was to be preached in the world. He did this on other occasions, such as in the parable of the wicked vine-growers, in which He declared that the vineyard should be taken from its current occupants and given to others who would bring forth fruit (Mt. 21:41). It is incredible that Jesus would speak of a time of the Gentiles that was similar to the time of merciful visitation that was enjoyed by the Jews, and imagine that the time of the Gentiles was only to last approximately thirty years. The Jewish “time” lasted thousands of years. It would only be mocking the poor Gentiles to dignify the period of a single generation with the name: “a season of gracious visitation.”

**The Parable of the Fig Tree**

The parable of the fig tree was used by Jesus to indicate the certain connection between the signs and the great event that was to follow. At first, it seems to exclude the idea of a protracted length of time. But on second thought, we will find out that it does not. The point of the parable lies in the comparison of the signs of the times with the first buds of the fig tree. The comparison implies that the last judgment is not the thing which is at the door. The last day is the harvest season, but from the first buds of early summer to the harvest, there is a long interval. Furthermore,
the parable suggests the right way to understand the statement: “This generation will not pass away until all things take place” (Lk. 21:32). Christ did not mean that the generation that was living then was to witness the end, but in that generation all the things which form the incipient stage in the development would appear. It was the age of beginnings - shoots and blossoms, not fruit and harvest. In that generation, the beginnings of Christianity started. And with it came the new world that it would create. Also, the end of the Jewish world would come. The symbol of it was a fig tree covered with leaves, but without any blossom or fruit, like the one Jesus Himself had cursed. It was a prophecy of Israel's coming destruction. The buds of most things in the church's history appeared in that age: gospel preaching, anti-Christian tendencies, persecutions, heresies, divisions, and apostasies. However, all of these had to grow until they were full blown; then the end would come. No person could tell how long the development would take, not even the Son of Man (Mk. 13:32). It was a state secret of the Almighty. And no one should wish to pry into it.

The time when the end comes is known only to God. Therefore, the idea that the time can be predicted must be dismissed. No data is given in Scripture for that purpose. If such data were given, then the secret would be virtually disclosed. Therefore, we regard the calculations of students of prophecy concerning the times and seasons as random guesses that are unworthy of serious attention. The day when the death of the world comes needs to be hidden for the purposes of providence as much as the day that individuals die. And we have no doubt that God has kept His secret. Some continue to believe that they can determine the end of the world from prophetic numbers, in the same way that astrologers try to determine the course of individual lives from the position of the stars.

Even though the prophetic discourse that Jesus gave did not reveal anything about the times, it does not follow that it was therefore valueless. It effectively taught two lessons: (1) one was especially for the benefit of the Twelve, and (2) the other was for all Christians and all ages. The lesson for the Twelve was so they could dismiss from their minds any hope that there would be a restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Israel's depressing doom was not reconstruction. It was destruction and dispersion.

Here is the general lesson for everyone in this discourse: “Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is” (Mk. 13:33). The call for us to be watchful is based on our ignorance about the time when the end will come. However long the end is in coming, it will finally come suddenly as a thief in the night. Jesus illustrated the importance of watching and waiting in two parables: *The Faithful and Unfaithful Servants* and *The Wise and Foolish Virgins* (Mt. 24:45-51; 25:1-13). Both parables depict the different conduct of the servants who professed to know God during the period of delay. We are taught that the effect on some is to make them negligent. They are men-pleasers and irregular workers who need oversight and
the stimulus provided by extraordinary events. Others are steady, regular, and habitually faithf ul. They work as well when the Master is absent as when He watches over them. The treatment that both of them receive when the Master returns corresponds to their behavior. One group is rewarded; the other is punished. This is the essence of the parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants. Luke provides an important footnote that tells us about the conduct of people who are in authority in the house of the absent Lord (Lk. 12:41-48). While the common servants are, for the most part, negligent, the higher servants are tyrants to their fellow-servants. This is exactly what church dignitaries did in later periods of church history. Jesus contemplated this kind of thing going on. But it required the lapse of centuries to bring it about. This is another proof that in this discourse, His prophetic eye swept over a vast tract of time. Another remark is suggested by the great reward that is promised to those who would not abuse their authority: “He will put him in charge of all his possessions” (Lk. 12:44). The greatness of the reward indicates an expectation that faithfulness will be rare among the stewards of the house. Certainly, the Head of the church seems to have understood the prevalence of a negligent spirit among all of His servants, both high and low. For He speaks of the lord of the household as one who is so thankful for the conduct of the faithful that he prepares himself to serve them while they sit to eat (Lk. 12:37). Hasn’t the Lord’s understanding been well confirmed by the things that happened?

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

The parable of the Ten Virgins, which is familiar to everyone and full of instruction, teaches us this peculiar lesson: “Watching” does not imply sleepless worry and constant thought about the future. Rather, it suggests quiet, steady attention to present duties. While the bridegroom waited to return, all the virgins (wise and foolish alike) slept. The wise ones were different from their sisters because they had everything ready in case of a sudden call. This is a sober and reasonable representation of the duty of waiting by someone who understands what could happen. For, in a certain sense, sleep of the mind with reference to eternity is as necessary as physical sleep is to the body. Constantly thinking about the great realities of the future would only result in weakness, distraction, and madness, or disorder, idleness, and restlessness. This happened in Thessalonica, where the conduct of many (who watched in the wrong way) made it necessary for Paul to give them the wise counsel to be quiet, and work, and eat bread that was earned by working with their own hands (II Thes. 3:12).

The great prophetic discourse ended well with a solemn representation of the final judgment of the world. All mankind will be assembled to be judged either by the historical gospel that was preached to them as a witness, or by its great ethical principle, the law of love, that was written on their hearts. And those who have loved Christ and served Him in person, or His representatives - the poor, the destitute, the suffering - will be welcomed to the realms of the blessed. Those who have acted otherwise will be sent away to keep company with the devil and his angels.