

Mark 13:1-8 “Living in Light of the Future”\*\*

Main Idea: You can tell a lot about people by noticing what impresses them. In Mark 13:1-8 we discover both what tends to impress us and what should impress us.

I. Our tendency is to be impressed by the temporal (1-2).

A. The disciples saw buildings (1).

1. Herod’s temple was impressive.
2. Herod’s temple was the pride of the Jews.

B. Jesus saw what would happen to the buildings (2).

1. Our problem is that we’re too easily impressed.
2. Make sure what impresses you now will be impressive in 100 years.

II. Jesus calls us to be impressed by the eternal (3-8).

A. The disciples asked questions about the future (3-4).

1. They wanted to know **when**.
2. They wanted to know **what**.

B. The Lord stressed our need for discernment in the present (5-8).

1. He warned His followers to look out for deceivers (5).
2. He predicted that deceivers would have great success (6).
3. He revealed several pre-end time events (7-8).
  - a. There will be wars and rumors of wars.
  - b. There will be conflicts between nations and kingdoms.
  - c. There will be earthquakes and famines.
4. He called these “the beginning of birth pains” (8b).

Make It Personal: What’s capturing your attention these days?

1. What’s impressive to the world doesn’t impress God.
2. What’s impressive to the world shouldn’t impress us.
3. What should impress us is Christ.

Back when personal computers were first hitting the scene in the ‘80’s, my friend Larry bought a Macintosh and brought it over to our apartment to show me what it could do. Wow, was I impressed! It had this thing called a “mouse” that you could use to do all kinds of neat things. I lost sleep thinking about that machine. I wanted one—not

Larry's, one of my own! I had to have one. And so we saved our pennies and the day came when I bought one, a used Mac for \$1,000. I brought it home, set it up, and started using it.

Then something happened, not all at once but gradually. My 128k external drive Mac computer started losing its luster. It wasn't long before it wasn't quite so impressive to me any more. In fact, I started having eyes for an IBM PS/1, a more powerful machine with a color monitor (the Mac had a black and white screen). I wanted one. I had to have one. I lost sleep over the thought of buying one. And so eventually I did.

The fact is, you can tell a lot about people by noticing *what impresses them*. Change that. You can tell a lot about *yourself* but taking note of what impresses *you*. It's so easy to be impressed by things that matter very little in the light of eternity, things like a bigger house, latest style clothing, a new car with all the bells and whistles, and so on.

Don't misunderstand. There's nothing inherently wrong with a new house, or clothes, or a car, or even a computer. Stuff is stuff. God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment," as 1 Timothy 6:17 states. The problem isn't the material objects. Our problem, simply put, is that as sinners we are too easily *impressed*. We attach value that is way out of proportion to things, to *stuff* that really has little value in the light of eternity.

I say *we* because this tendency affects *every* human being. Part of what it means to be a sinner is that we are prone to be too easily impressed. Isn't that what happened to Adam and Eve. They lived in a garden filled with delights and enjoyed perfect fellowship with God Himself, yet fell for the lie that a bite of forbidden fruit would bring greater satisfaction.

What is it that people who are too easily impressed need? What's the remedy? We find the answer in Mark 13. Simply stated, it boils down to this. We need to *learn to live in light of the future*.

In Mark 13 Jesus teaches about the end times. It's called the "Olivet Discourse" because, as we'll see, Jesus delivered this message while sitting on the Mount of Olives. It's worth noting that Jesus taught this message that deals with the doctrine of eschatology (end times) because of the very problem I've just described.

Before beginning let me state the obvious. Mark 13 (and the parallel accounts of Matthew 24-25 and Luke 21) is prophecy. That's significant. What do people who are too easily impressed need as a corrective? To think about the future more. The study of eschatology is meant to be practical. Learning about the future is supposed to affect the way we live in the present.

There's something else you must know about Mark 13. It's hard to understand! William Barclay sums up the challenge, "Mark 13 is one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament for a modern reader to understand." Then he suggests a reason why. "That is because it is one of the most Jewish chapters in the Bible...All through it Jesus is using categories and pictures which were very familiar to the Jews of his day, but which are very strange, and indeed, unknown, to many modern readers."[11](#)

That's one of the reasons we have spent the last three weeks studying prophetic material in the book of Daniel, to fill our minds with the imagery that Jesus assumed His listeners knew when He delivered this discourse.

The Lord willing, we're going to take three weeks to unfold this important chapter. Our focus this morning will be the first eight verses. It's there in a conversation between Jesus and His disciples that we gain two vital insights.

## I. Our tendency is to be impressed by the temporal (1-2).

Notice verse 1—"As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!'"

Jesus is leaving the temple where He has been on the hot-seat for two chapters now, responding to His hostile critics. The cross is but a day or so away. One of His disciples—we're not told which one—got excited about

something. Matthew's account indicates the other disciples were impressed as well. By what? By what they *saw*.

**A. The disciples saw buildings (1).** "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" They're talking about the temple complex. And they're not exaggerating. The stones were massive and the buildings were magnificent.

1. *Herod's temple was impressive.* It was actually considered one of the great wonders of the Roman world.

At this point we need some background if we're going to appreciate fully what the disciples are saying and feel the force of Jesus' response.

This was actually the third Jewish temple. Indeed, to go back even further, first there was the tabernacle which basically was a tent where God met with His people and His people sacrificed offerings to Him. Ten centuries B.C. King David believed God deserved something better, a permanent house, and his son, Solomon, replaced the tabernacle with the first temple. That temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. and later rebuilt in the fifth century in Ezra's day. Often referred to as "Zerubbabel's temple, the second temple was a much smaller than the first.

Over time the second temple fell into disrepair and so the third temple came about (actually a renovation and major expansion of the second). The third temple was by far the most beautiful. It's called "Herod's temple" and the building of it began in 19 B.C. The purpose of the project wasn't so much to bring glory to God as to reconcile the Jews to their Idumaeian king, Herod the Great. Although the main structure was finished within ten years, work continued until 64 A.D.

Since Jerusalem sits on a mountain, Herod had to carve away rock in order to flatten out an area on which to build the massive complex. The size of the temple area was about 500 yards north to south and 325 yards east to west.

According to Josephus some of the stones were forty feet long by twelve feet high and eighteen feet wide—the size of boxcars on a train! No wonder Jesus' disciple was impressed! "What massive stones!" Indeed, they were.

And the comment about the buildings being "magnificent" was true as well. From a distance the temple mount looked like a mountain of gold. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, described the sight:

"The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white."<sup>121</sup>

Yes, Herod's temple was impressive. It's not surprising then that...

2. *Herod's temple was the pride of the Jews.* Perhaps it goes without saying, but this was the most spectacular building in Jerusalem. Today, the Wailing Wall (a section that remains not from the temple itself but from a wall in the complex) is the pride of the Jews.

Was it out of national pride that this disciple called attention to the stones and buildings of the temple? I think it was more than that. In Matthew's account we discover a background to this disciple's comment. Just before leaving the temple that day, Jesus said these words recorded in Matthew 23:37-38:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate."

Desolate? Did Jesus say Jerusalem's "house" (the temple) was or would be *desolate*? Yes, He said that. But to the disciples, it sure didn't look desolate. And with the size of those stones, it was hard to imagine it ever becoming desolate. Did they hear Jesus correctly? Perhaps that's why one of them pointed out the impressive nature of the temple.

This we know for sure. The disciples saw buildings. That's what impressed them. *Buildings. Manmade buildings.*

Keep the context in mind. Jesus is on His way to the cross. He is about to fulfill the mission His Father gave Him, to rescue sinners by means of His death as their substitute. He's going to form those rescued sinners into a new people by the power of His resurrection. He has come to do something radically new, something rooted in the old forms of Judaism and even foreshadowed in those forms (including the temple). And through His perfect life, death and resurrection, He is fulfilling the intent of those old forms.

Yet the disciples are still captivated by the old. What they see are *buildings*. Jesus, on the other hand, Jesus, the One who is about to die, saw beyond the buildings.

**B. Jesus saw what would happen to the buildings (2).** Hear Him speak: “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

Talk about a conversation stopper! “Yes, I see the buildings,” Jesus said. “But I also see what's going to happen to them. They're coming down, every last stone.”

Why did Jesus say that? For many reasons. The most obvious one is that's what was going to happen! And it did. In A.D. 70—just forty years after Jesus uttered this prophecy—the Roman general Titus attacked and conquered Jerusalem. He killed one million Jews and demolished the temple, first gutting it by fire and then by razing it to the ground. Not one stone was left in place.

But let's not miss a perhaps less than obvious reason Jesus burst His disciples bubble. With those stunning words He is exposing a problem His disciples had in the present—and we share it with them. It's this...

*1. Our problem is that we're too easily impressed.* For the disciples it was a building complex. For me, it was a new computer. For you, it could be a job or or a degree or a house or someTHING else. What is it that you *want*, that you *must* have?

The One who created the mountains isn't impressed by a few rocks, no matter how big they are! And we who know Him shouldn't be either. The solution? Jesus will develop the solution more fully in the following verses, but here's where it begins...

*2. Make sure what impresses you now will be impressive in 100 years.* A few years ago our car was sitting in the driveway when the wind caught the concrete-filled basketball pole and dropped it—you guessed it!—right on the car! If you think a Hummer is impressive, just wait a hundred years. A hundred years ago people walking down the street were impressed by the person who had a nicest horse-drawn buggy!

The point is, make sure that what impresses you now is worthy of that affection. Sure the temple buildings are impressive *now*, but they won't be. They're going to be rubble. Sure, six pack abs are impressive now, but give it a little time and they won't be. Sure that dream house may impress you and others now, but in 100 years? It'll be a maintenance headache for someone (if it's still around).

You say, “Okay, what will be impressive in 100 years?” I'll give you a clue. They are things you cannot presently see with your eyes. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:18—“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, *but on what is unseen*. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

You see, our tendency is to be impressed by the temporal, by the things we can *see*. But Jesus says we need a perspective change. In the scene that follows...

## II. Jesus calls us to be impressed by the eternal (3-8).

That's insight #2. Let's examine the text that supports it...

Verses 3-4—"As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives [keep in mind this is where Jesus will return at His second coming] opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?'"

From the disciples' vantage point on the Mount of Olives, the temple was in clear view across the Kidron Valley . Jesus' shocking announcement prompts four of the men to approach Jesus for clarification.

**A. The disciples asked questions about the future (3-4).** They want to know two things...

1. *They wanted to know **when**.* When will your prediction take place? And...
2. *They wanted to know **what**.* What sign will indicate the time is at hand?

It's apparent that the disciples have concluded Jesus is talking about the judgment at end of the age. The Jews divided history up into two ages, *this age* followed by *the age to come*. They believed this age of suffering would end with a time of great distress, after which the Messiah would come and establish His Messianic kingdom. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus has come. They thus conclude Jesus is talking about the end of the present age. *When* will it happen, they want to know—this week, next month, next year, *when?* And *what sign* will indicate You are ready to judge the world and establish Your kingdom, Jesus?

In contrast to the disciples' request for information about the future...

**B. The Lord stressed our need for discernment in the present (5-8).** "Jesus said to them: 'Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.'"

The disciples wanted a sign. But rather than a sign Jesus gave them a host of exhortations (there are nineteen commands in His response in Mark 13) and warnings concerning the trials that lay before them.

1. *He warned His followers to look out for deceivers (5).* "Watch out!" He says in verse 5. "You must be on your guard," He reemphasizes in verse 9. And in verse 23, "Be on your guard." And in verse 33, "Be on guard! Be alert!" And in verse 35, "Keep watch!" And His final word in verse 37, "Watch!"

Watch for what? Verse 5 again—for *deceivers*. Watch out for those who are going to try and trick you and mislead you. In verse 6...

2. *He predicted that deceivers would have great success (6).* Note the first and last word of verse 6. It's the same word. "**Many** will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive **many**."

The deceivers Jesus has in mind will use His name. In some cases they will claim to be Christ. In other cases they will claim to speak for Christ. Of course, what Jesus predicted has occurred.

In the second century A.D., Bar-Cochba claimed full Messiahship and led many Jews astray. In our day false religions abound, each claiming to be right.

*Many* will come, the Lord predicted. And deceive *many*.

Let me give you a mathematic equation...

*Deception + Lack of discernment = Disaster*

The fact that deceivers will come is inevitable. Jesus told us so. If we are going to stand, Jesus says we must

*watch out*. We must exercise *discernment*. And yet what is it that the contemporary church lacks? Tragically, it's *discernment*. We are so prone to believe that anyone who uses Christ's name (who calls himself a 'Christian') is genuine.

And so we have "Christian" music, and "Christian" businesses, and "Christian" schools, and "Christian" homes. How do we know they're Christian? Because they SAY they are. Never mind the Christian musician's lyrics and lifestyle resemble Hollywood more than holiness. He's "Christian" because he uses the name of Christ in his songs, right? He's a "Christian" businessman because he prays in Jesus' name before he has lunch with clients, right? It's a "Christian" home because it has a red letter Bible on the coffee table, right?

*Watch out!* Jesus said. A true Christian is one who knows and follows Christ and therefore does what Christ did and commanded.

Specifically, Jesus is warning about false religious leaders who would use His name. Sadly, in our day some seem to think that all "churches" are legitimate because all "churches" believe in the true Jesus. But they aren't because they don't.

The Christ in liberal churches is not the real Christ. According to their own statements, He was not born of a virgin, did not shed His blood to pay the penalty for sinners, did not rise again physically from the dead, and is not returning to earth again in bodily form. What they believe stands in stark contrast with the record of Scripture. Therefore, they do not believe in Christ, but an antichrist. R. Alan Cole's observation is right, "To worship Christ with false beliefs about Him is to worship a false Christ, by whatever name we call Him."<sup>[3]</sup>

The New Testament is filled with warnings similar to this one by Jesus. Paul warned that deceivers would come into churches (Acts 20:29-31). So did Peter (2 Pet. 2:1, 20-21). And Jude doesn't say they *will* come but that they *have* come (past tense) for by his day, just one generation after Jesus gave this prophecy, they were inside the church (see Jude 4). The last of the apostles, John, echoed the same warning over and over (1 John 2:26; 3:7; 3:10; 4:1-3) and his words in 2 John 7-11 are alarming:

"Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world [past tense! The deceivers Jesus predicted were out in full force by A.D. 90]. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."

Those last words may not be politically correct but they are the Word of God. If we don't keep the church pure, it will cease to exist. It took just one generation for false teachers to infiltrate the church, just one! Jude says, "They're here!" John says, "They're here!"

What Jesus predicted happened. The deceivers did come in His name and they did lead many astray. That's not all the Master predicted on the Mount that day, however.

3. *He revealed several pre-end time events (7-8)*. "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains."

Note three predictions Jesus made for His disciples...

- a. There will be wars and rumors of wars. That's verse 7. And...
- b. There will be conflicts between nations and kingdoms. That's Jesus' prophecy in verse 8.

Wars have always been with us and will be. Will Durant wrote, "In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."<sup>[4]</sup> Yet it's easy to think that the end of the world is near when war strikes your country.

“Don’t do that,” Jesus tells His followers. “When you hear of wars, the end is *still to come*.”

Note carefully Jesus’ perspective on war. In this sin-cursed world, “Such things must happen,” He said. “But do not be alarmed,” He emphasized. In other words, don’t conclude every time war breaks out, “This must be the end of the world!” It’s not.

As Christians, we ought not be alarmed over international crises. Indeed, our lack of “going to pieces” should stand out in a winsome way to a fretting world. “Let not your hearts be troubled,” Jesus said elsewhere (John 14:1). He told us ahead of time what to expect so we would not be alarmed.

Are you a worrier? Do you fret in fear over the details of life? Does, “Oh no! What bad thing is going to happen next?!” describe your mindset? If so, here’s the solution. *Trust the Lord*. Believe that He is in control, for He is!

c. There will be earthquakes and famines.

Kent Hughes comments, “During the years between Christ’s death and the destruction of the Temple, there was a terrible earthquake in Laodicea, Vesuvius buried Pompeii, and there was a famine in Rome itself. This did not mean the end of all things. Neither would it mean the end if California fell into the sea and you could sail to Hawaii from Las Vegas. The truth is, with the rise of every war and earthquake there comes an increase of false Christs who say they have the answer. We are not to be deceived by any of this.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Jesus predicted what was coming: wars, rumors of war, international conflicts, earthquakes, and famines. But He made it clear those events were not signaling the end. Rather...

4. He called these “*the beginning of birth pains*” (8b). “These are the beginning of birth pains.”

‘Birth pains’ is an image the Old Testament prophets associated with the period right before the coming of the Messiah. Just like a mother must endure intense agony before delivering the prize of her affection, so God’s people must endure intense agony before the long-anticipated Messianic age arrives. The “beginning” of birth pains indicates there will be many more sufferings other than those Jesus just mentioned.

We are living in that time period, my friend, what Jesus called *the beginning of birth pains*. We are living in the time period between the Messiah’s first coming and His promised second coming. The wars, rumors of war, international conflicts, earthquakes, and famines we read about in our daily newspapers are *just the beginning* of birth pains.

“You mean it’s going to get worse?” you ask. Indeed. “Birth pains” is a figure of speech the Old Testament prophets used to depict the future time of Israel’s ultimate tribulation (in passages like Isaiah 13:6-10 and Micah 4:9-10), the initial phase of the “Day of the Lord” that will precede Messiah’s coming to establish His eternal kingdom. The book of Revelation uses different language to refer to the coming time of birth pains, calling it “the great tribulation (Rev. 7:14).”

Jesus will have more to say about these matters as we continue to ponder His teaching from the Mount of Olives. We’ll do that next time. But for now, a personal question...

### Make It Personal: What’s capturing your attention these days?

Be honest. Are you living in light of eternity, or does the temporal occupy your attention? Let me state as simply as I can three realities. I know you know them but part of my God-given assignment as a pastor is to *call you to remembrance*. Know this...

1. *What’s impressive to the world doesn’t impress God*. Massive buildings are miniscule in the sight of the One who holds planet earth in His hands. We just need to hear this regularly. God is NOT impressed by what we consider

“big.” Furthermore...

2. *What's impressive to the world shouldn't impress us.* Not if we claim to be God's people. What should impress God's people is what impresses God, and what impresses God?

“Seek first the kingdom of God ,” Jesus said (Matt. 6:33). Paul put it this way in Colossians 3:2-4, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Be honest. What captures your attention? What captivates you? Is it God and His kingdom, or some idolatrous substitute?

Know this. What you and I need the world considers foolish. It's true. The cross of Jesus Christ was not impressive. It was appalling for the cross is an object of scorn and shame. Yet to be saved you must embrace the cross. You must be *impressed by the cross*, for there on the cross God punished His own Son and thereby provided the means of forgiveness for you. No, the cross isn't impressive to the world, for it offends the “good people” of the world who are convinced they are okay with God because they are “good.” But beloved, those who are impressed with their own goodness are forfeiting the grace that could be theirs and sliding down the slippery slope that ends in eternal agony.

It boils down to this, my friend...

3. *What should impress us is Christ.* There is no more *impressive* person in the universe! Indeed, He is the treasure of all treasures. Do you know Him? And if you do, are you cherishing Him? He is truly worthy.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[\[1\]](#) Barclay, p. 303.

[\[2\]](#) Josephus, quoted in Kent Hughes, p. 136.

[\[3\]](#) R. Alan Cole, p. 274

[\[4\]](#) Quoted by Kent Hughes, p. 137.

[\[5\]](#) Kent Hughes, p. 138.