

Parable in Threes

Matthew 25:1-13

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Throughout the season, we have been going through parables of the kingdom reminding us that we, too, just like the people in Jesus's time, are preparing for the return and the coming of Christ and His kingdom to come. So, the question becomes for us here this morning, how do we prepare for the coming of Christ? And I'm not talking about your shopping plans after service today, which by the way, if you are going out to the malls and braving the shopping waters, good luck. Be safe. Be kind. Be a Christian.

How do we prepare for the coming of Christ? I am talking about a different kind of preparation. How do we prepare for the kingdom of God that Christ is bringing? And what has Jesus given us to tell us about what that looks like?

Now, before we get into this passage, today's parable needs a little bit of context before we begin. Where we are at this point in Matthew is that we are nearing the end of Jesus's ministry as He heads over to the cross. And His disciples are getting a bit anxious. You see, they have left everything to follow Him, their careers, their family, a sense of stability, all of this to follow Jesus who they believed would bring about the coming of the kingdom of God. But everything that the disciples thought was associated with this king and His kingdom wasn't happening. At least, it wasn't happening according to their own expectations.

In fact, everyone seems to be opposed to Jesus and His teachings. The Pharisees are after His head. The crowds get more unruly. And opposition just continues to grow.

Now, if you're a disciple of Jesus, this isn't exactly the kind of environment that would be comforting to tell you that a kingdom was coming. You're expecting a royal peaceful kingdom with prosperity. So, it's not hard to imagine the disciples having a really hard time grasping Jesus and His actions. And as they get closer and closer to the cross, they get more impatient. I mean, imagine these conversations. Jesus, just tell us who the greatest disciple is. Jesus, tell us who's going to sit at your right and left hand when you become king. Jesus, stop clearing the temple; that's not good optics. Jesus, stop cursing fig trees and scribes and Pharisees. Jesus, we're confused. What's going on here? Jesus, you're telling us at multiple times that you're going to die. What's going on?

On one of these days nearing the end of Jesus's ministry, Jesus and His disciples leave the temple and head up to the Mount of Olives which gives this view overlooking the city of Jerusalem and the temple. And this gets the disciples thinking about the kingdom of God again. And the disciples ask Him a question that I'm sure many of us would be dying to know in the chapter before our text today, Matthew 24:3. Jesus, when will be the end when your kingdom will come? And what will be the sign of your coming?

How many of you can relate to the disciples' frustration here today? How many of us would simply want to know exactly when Jesus is going to come back, what's going to happen, and what it will look like? Because the realities of day to day life hit us in ways where uncertainty continues to cast a doubt for us. It gets us distracted. It makes us consider, perhaps, that Jesus isn't returning and coming back. So, rather than preparing, we passively wait.

But Jesus being Jesus, He answers in the form of parables. And He tells three stories of what the kingdom of God will look like. And so, this is a parable of threes, and this parable is the second of those three parables that Jesus speaks about what the kingdom of heaven will look like. And even within this parable, there are three characters, three plot points, and three themes. And so, we'll dive into that.

Let's read Matthew 25:1-13.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Father, be with the preaching of your word. Help us to ready ourselves for the coming of your kingdom. May we be active participants in preparing for your return knowing that you come unexpectedly, but right on time. We thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who here reminds us not just what Christmas is all about, but the course and trajectory of our entire lives, what our lives are all about as we ready ourselves, prepare ourselves for your glory and for your name. And it is in Jesus’s mighty name we pray these things. Amen.

Let’s dive into this story. Here, we have a parable in threes. There’s three characters, three plot points, and three larger themes. So, let’s start with these three characters, the foolish, the wise, and the bridegroom.

Now, what is interesting is the fact that the disciples are asking the question of when the age would come. They were looking for clues, signs, Davinci Code stuff of the coming kingdom. But Jesus is more focused here on the characters of the coming kingdom. In other words, Jesus focuses on the end times and the coming kingdom in these three parables in chapters 24 and 25 just to set up three different kinds of individuals.

The first individual demonstrates the flaws of the people who are outside and cast out of the kingdom. The second are the qualities of those who are welcome and inside the kingdom of God. And the third character is the character of this great king himself. So, when you read through Matthew 24 and 25, each of these three parables that Jesus tells His disciples, these attributes are played out in all these three different kinds of characters. Specifically, in the parable that we’re reading today, it is the foolish who are outside of the kingdom, the wise who are inside, and the bridegroom who is king.

To fully understand this story that Jesus is telling, we need to understand a little of the background here. The parable of the ten virgins begins with Jesus pointing out what the future kingdom of heaven will look like, and Jesus talks about this in the context of a wedding. Here, we have ten virgins or maidens, which would probably be a better translation here, who were probably the American equivalent of bridesmaids to a wedding. And so, their naming as “virgins” in this passage is more likely to do with their status at the wedding because it was assumed culturally back then that all young girls were virgins.

In order to understand the characters better and their motivations, you have to understand that this was a wedding that is actually quite similar in a lot of ways to the weddings of today. They are a huge deal. They had relational, financial, social, communal implications for not just the two getting married, but for everyone around them in the city. And like our weddings of today, there is a tremendous amount of build-up. Being betrothed back then took about a year-long process. It was a legally binding contract which for the couple was actually called husband and wife, but they did not live together or consummate

the marriage until the wedding feast. And like the weddings of today, the wedding ceremony and the feast were a huge and important ordeal for the community.

Now, if you've ever planned a wedding ceremony, maybe you can begin to sympathize here with the emotional and physical responsibility that Jesus is setting up here for these ten maidens who are assisting in this wedding. I don't mean to re-stress any of you who have been a part of wedding planning, but you're probably having flashbacks about the immense amount of responsibilities that are involved.

Get all your family and friends to meet together at a specific time on a specific day that pleases everybody. Organize food allergies and preferences so that no one dies on your wedding day. Find a beautiful venue for that wedding that has natural sunlight, stain glass windows, historical significance, and a good sound system. Get a photographer who can make you look candid, happy, perfectly dressed, who knows your best angles. Pick a DJ who isn't going to ruin the entire wedding by playing "One Is the Loneliest Number" as your enter song. Pick the perfect flowers out of the 4 million different species of flowers that exist in the world. Pick a color for table runners which up until this point in your life you've never thought about the color of table runners. And most important, have fun and relax, and make sure everyone has a good time.

Now, I want you to imagine all of that and multiply that times seven, because that's how many days a wedding feast would have lasted back in Jesus's day. It was a wedding feast with food, drink, and festivities the entire seven days, multiple periods during the day, multiple things that you had to worry about. Imagine being in that wedding party as one of these ten maidens. The weight of the responsibility that's on them should be held with a certain amount of readiness, preparedness for what's to come.

It's assumed that these ten maidens knew this. But Jesus in telling this story splits the party in half. Five were foolish, and the other five that Jesus calls wise. Now, how do we know that they are foolish and wise? Since Jesus is the one telling the story, as the omniscient storyteller, He's making that determination of if their actions are foolish or not. No matter what you think of their actions, whether you sympathize with them or not, their foolishness or wisdom is based upon the storyteller's vantage point.

And the reason why I'm talking about this right now is that too often, we determine the foolishness or the wisdom of the text based upon our own judgement call. Maybe for some of you when you read this story, you can sympathize with the foolish because you're the kind of person that takes things as they come, and you can see how what they were doing was being wise at the time with the available knowledge that they had. But that's not for you to determine in the text. Likewise, if you're type A, super organized, never late, and you feel as though the story justifies your entire existence, that's also not for you to determine because that's not your judgement call. That's Jesus's as the storyteller here.

When we read scripture, it is always important to read it from the vantage point of the narrator who knows everything because he's the one telling the story. And in this particular parable, they can trust the narrator because the narrator is literally God. Jesus is calling them foolish and wise to describe their state from the beginning so that you know that the actions they take here will determine the outcome in the story and the larger picture about what Jesus is saying about being prepared. So, type A's and type B's, you can breathe a little bit here and instead know that this is not an evaluation of your personality, but rather you can consider why they are foolish and why they are wise.

Wisdom is a huge theme throughout scripture. It's what drives and makes a difference between those who are in the covenantal community and those who are not. In the Proverbs and in the Psalms, wisdom passages have immense amount to say about our fate. Those who have plenty and those who have little, those who have strong relationships and those who are alienated from others, those who are rich and those who are poor; these are aspects of wisdom that determines who belongs now in this story to the kingdom of God or not.

There are people in the kingdom of heaven who will get ready for this wedding, who will get ready for the wedding feast as we just read in our scripture readings today, and there will be people who will, foolishly in waiting passively for this wedding or not preparing, end up outside. Jesus is inviting you to consider which one you are based upon the actions here.

But what about this third character who is the bridegroom? The bridegroom back in an agricultural society bore the responsibility of the land and the kingdom that belonged to the totality of the family in marriage. They would be responsible in defending the family, preserving the future of the marriage. The bridegroom, unlike many of the weddings and marriages of today, he and his family would largely be in charge of the festivities that would occur because the main portion of the wedding feast would be held at the bridegroom's house.

Normally, the bridegroom at the beginning would go with some of his close friends to the bride's home, and various ceremonies were held followed by a procession through the streets where around nightfall, the ceremonies would conclude to his home. And at his home, the formal festivities would begin.

Imagine this epic mealtime, a prepared feast and the honored guests who would be there. Imagine the nature of what it meant to make sure that you were attending this wedding right on time and that you were there for this family ready to go. To miss out or come unprepared was the highest offense that could be given. This isn't a casual wedding invite that you could just simply decline. Rather, this was the importance of knowing that you were close and connected to the bridegroom. You were a part of his family and, therefore, a part of this new life and this new community that you had with him. For the bridegroom to be disrespected at his own wedding meant that the family would be disgraced. So, culturally, any kind of offense here would be seen as an act of hostility and rejection.

Because of this, the bridegroom has the authority to reject anyone from entering into the wedding feast if he so chooses. And he also has the power to let anyone in who knows, who believes, who trusts, and is with him. Do we see echoes here of what Christ is trying to tell us? This is the most prestigious guestlist of all time.

Now, being on this side of redemptive history, we know the imagery of Christ as the bridegroom and the church as the bride as scripture talks about it. So, we have the ability to see some very obvious connections here in this parable. But to the disciples hearing it, they're hearing echoes of the Old Testament. They're hearing about the wedding feast and bridegrooms and the Lord's relationship to Israel, how God is the bridegroom to God's people. In the end times, it would be like a wedding feast that is prophesied in Isaiah. They're hearing these echoes here as Jesus is telling the story.

His disciples are getting this picture of this messianic wedding feast. And although it might seem that all of these maidens are a part of the wedding feast, not all of them truly think correctly about the wedding feast. And this will lead to their destruction.

That leads us to our second point which has three plot points: the preparation, the delay, and the demand. We start by noticing that both the foolish and the wise take their lamps with them. It's a good start. But only the wise take an additional flask of oil with their lamps.

Now, these would be more like simple torches. They would be covered in rags. And as the flames would burn, they would require oil to be doused upon them from time to time as they were traveling. If there was only a short delay, you could actually just go ahead and soak your towel in oil, and it would be good for a certain amount of time. Then there would be no need to bring an additional flask of oil with you. In the initial order of things, it would appear that the foolish are actually being very efficient with what they are bringing as opposed to the wise who seem to be incumbering themselves by bringing a flask of oil, oil that potentially would be completely unnecessary.

We have to ask ourselves why is one foolish and the other seen as wise? Well, what's the overlying assumption of the foolish in the story? It's that the bridegroom would not be delayed and

would surely act upon the maiden's schedule rather than the bridegroom's schedule. They themselves are thinking the bridegroom is going to arrive on their agenda. So, everything in their preparation is putting themselves and their preparation in line with their own schedule. And so, they are not prepared for the possibility that the bridegroom would be delayed.

Now, remember, the analogy here is in the context of the coming of the end of the age and Jesus's return when the kingdom would arrive. But isn't there a corollary to how we live our everyday lives in this parable? How often, even in the ordinary and mundane moments in our lives, are we expecting Jesus to come on our own terms in our own timelines? We prepare just enough for Jesus to come when we expect Him to, but nothing more.

And this is what Jesus is saying here. To prepare foolishly is to expect Christ, to expect this king and this kingdom to be in accordance with your own schedule and your own timing so much so that it requires no expectation of delay or suffering or inconvenience or faith that you are ready to meet Him. You might be ready today to meet Christ, but you want to meet Him on your terms. And this passage is saying that this is not preparation. This is foolishness.

But that is not how the wise act in this passage, is it? The wise here are understanding that this bridegroom with all that the bridegroom has on his plate could be delayed. He might not arrive at his expected time. And so, they prepare themselves in expectation for that possibility. They were not expecting the bridegroom to meet them on their own terms. Rather, they knew that potential problems could occur in the waiting. And they are readying themselves to deal with these problems so that when the bridegroom arrives, they're ready to go.

It would be good for us to remind ourselves that as Christians, because none of us knows what lies ahead of us on this journey of the Christian life, we need to consider how we are preparing ourselves for the inevitable delay and potential suffering that we will endure before the kingdom of heaven comes and we are invited to this great wedding feast that Christ is preparing for us because here's the thing. Delay hits both the foolish and the wise. They both fall asleep in this passage. The difference is that the wise are able to fall asleep because they have positioned themselves ready for the bridegroom. What seems like laziness from the wise is actually appropriate because the wise have prepared themselves.

So, what does this mean for us here today? For those of us who are prepared for the coming of Christ again, who have trusted in Him for salvation and faith, who lean upon the death of Christ on the cross for our sins that He has taken away every stain, who have centered the focus of our lives not to be on our own comfort or schedule but to be centered around His return, to proclaim the joy of salvation, the grace we have received, the delay of Christ gives us opportunity to be ready and rest and sleep. But those who are foolish, those who are unprepared spiritually will find themselves resting and find the arrival of the bridegroom unprepared and without a way to enter into the wedding feast.

I've shared this story with you before, but I want to expand on this a little bit more today. An analogy I want to share is about a church in China called Early Reign Reformed Covenant Church. It's a nice little Presbyterian name for a Chinese church. At the beginning of 2018, new religious regulations were implemented all across China. Although many were uncertain of how strictly these regulations would be enforced, a pastor by the name of Wang Yi in this church was active in calling for China's house churches to not comply with these new regulations. They knew that doing so would come with the possibility that the Chinese government would arrest and detain them, their churches, their elders, their deacons, their families, and their children. But to take the alternative, even though it might have been easier, was simply not an option for them as they were trying to prepare their members and their church to look for the kingdom of God to spread in China rather than their own kingdom of comfort and safety and security.

Pastor Wang Yi would preach sermons preparing their congregation for inevitable hardship. He would write letters to them. He would go on blogs and post there. And I just want to read to you a couple of quotes of how he's tried to prepare his congregation well for this moment.

This is one of his writings in 20 ways in which the persecution that they're facing is actually God's way of shepherding them. Here are some quotes from that.

"I have seen many Chinese churches die in spirit as a result of their lack of preparation. The possibility of persecution is a test to see out of our fear of death, we choose to become slaves. Have our hearts truly been set free by the gospel? And will they remain honorable under any system and in any environment? Believers who live at ease usually misunderstand their piety. Only when the absolute temperature drops do we feel the cold and truly long for the light."

See, pastor Wang Yi wanted to prepare his church well, and not just in teaching. He and his elders prepared contingency plans expecting that they would be imprisoned so that regardless of whether the pastor was there or not, they would take every measure to try and meet as the gathered body of Christ and only meeting in small groups as a last resort because he longed for the church to be the church and prepare for the suffering that was to come.

Pastor Wang Yi and his wife are still imprisoned as I speak today after a little over a year since the government came and stormed their church building. The first elder of that church actually has been sentenced in jail for four years for simply passing out gospel tracts. And they're expecting pastor Wang Yi and his wife to be imprisoned for ten years or even more. He and his family and his church are ready for this moment because he ultimately understands what the wise maidens who prepare for the delay understand, that what seems like delay, suffering, inconvenience, persecution will only increase our anticipation and hope for the coming of the bridegroom.

This is why the demand from the foolish in this parable is ultimately rejected by the wise maidens. When the bridegroom announced that he is coming at midnight, the announcement is made, the bridegroom is coming! The unexpected hour for the bridegroom causes the foolish to panic. And so, they ask the wise, give us some of your oil. But the wise cannot give to the foolish. And it's not because they're selfish. It's not because they are trying to position themselves as being better than the foolish ones. It's simply because they have prepared themselves for this moment, and they cannot transfer their readiness to the foolish and still hope to make it to this wedding feast.

Now, many people have looked at this passage and try to say that the oil means good works, or the oil is salvation, or the oil is grace. And I think that's an over-reading of the passage. One thing, though, becomes very clear for us here. The wise cannot give their preparation to the foolish and expect the foolish to become as they are. You see, the foolish need to get it for themselves.

The commentator Matthew Henry puts it together quite nicely. The foolish

"will see their need of preparation hereafter when it should save them. We will not see their need of preparation now when it should sanctify and rule them. The wise virgins cannot help them. The foresight and preparedness of the wise cannot benefit the foolish when the end time crisis dawns. Preparedness can neither be transferred nor shared."

And this is what leads us to our final three themes that Jesus makes here in this parable. And that's the arrival, the judgement, and the advent. The bridegroom after being announced arrives, and the wise are prepared and ready to join this marvelous wedding feast. They have honored the bridegroom and have brought with them flasks of oil so that they are ready to meet him and enjoy all of the blessings that come in celebrating with his family. The long-expected bridegroom was delayed, but that doesn't matter now to the wise. It doesn't matter. They were ready to go. All they have now is the enjoyment for which they have long awaited. Their preparation has allowed them to enjoy the fellowship.

But it is not so for the foolish. We see here tragically that the door has been shut. And look at verse 11 here in this passage. I want you to pay attention to what it is saying. They come in and say,

“Lord, Lord, open to us.” And the bridegroom answers by saying, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” Now, that should be incredibly striking to us. I mean, what bridegroom doesn’t know who’s in the wedding party?

Yet, the judgement here is laid down. Their lack of preparation and the offense that was created has caused them to be cast out of the feast. They are cast out of the kingdom of God for their mentality. Jesus displays this reality of what judgement will be like for those who are foolish versus those who are wise. The parable of talents, which is the next parable that He follows up with, and we also see this in Jesus’s teaching on the narrow door in Luke 13:25-27 where similar language is being used. Judgement comes and is coming.

Yes, we have a loving God. Yes, we have a merciful God. But judgement comes not because God isn’t loving or isn’t merciful. Judgement comes because it’s simply too late.

C.S. Lewis says this in regards to the arrival of Christ and the judgement that comes. He says this.

“When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. What is good saying that you are on his side then when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream, something that never entered your head to conceive? When it comes crashing in, something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. What good is that? For this time, it will be God without disguise, something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror to every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no you saying you choose to lie down when it becomes impossible to stand up.”

In other words, the feast has begun, and the festivities have arrived. And so, the maidens on the outside have now tragically, when it has become too late to do so, shut out of the feast.

Jesus gives this parable as a wakeup call to His disciples to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God. And He gives this as a wakeup call to us as well. This December, we’re in a season of advent. But perhaps it is better to say that we are always in a state of advent because all of us here, each and every one of us who professes to be a disciple of Christ, we’re all awaiting and preparing for His return.

Despite the fact that we are often given into distraction, despite the fact that too oftentimes, the church is thinking about advent as sort of waiting passively and twiddling our thumbs until Jesus comes back, we must remember that Jesus is calling us here to be prepared for His coming again. He exhorts His disciples at the end of verse 13 to watch because no one knows the day or the hour. But we can prepare. We can hope. We can anticipate. And the beautiful part about being in the church is we can help others along the way when they are losing sight in hope as well. We may encourage them.

You see, the foolish could have realized their plight before the arrival of the bridegroom. They could have realized and recognized that the delay served as a chance to ready themselves. But they missed it.

What does preparation look like for each and every single one of you here today? Is it the realization that you need to rid yourself of distraction? Is it realizing that you’ve been putting God on your schedule? Is it that you have not realized that there would be times and trials and seasons in your life where it appears that God is late? But maybe it’s only because God is waiting for you to prepare for the hope that is to come. How are we preparing ourselves, the congregation of CPC, as a church? How are we readying our lives in worship for the glory of God to get ready, as our confession states, that we would be able to enjoy God and glorify Him forever? How are we preparing for that?

Because here is the good news, church. Jesus is coming back again. The bridegroom is coming. And He’s preparing us for the greatest of all feasts. As we have just read in Revelation 19:7,

“Let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of saints. And the angel said to me, ‘Write this. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’”

This is what Christmas is all about. It's the good news that Christ has come and will come again, that Christ will bring about His kingdom come. And in the meantime, while we wait, church, we prepare and ready ourselves.