

Introduction

Last week as we concluded Matthew 24, the stress was on the certainty that Jesus Christ will return but the uncertainty of the timing. No one except the Father knows the timing of Christ's second coming. And for this reason, it will be sudden and surprising, and the exhortation of Jesus is to always be in a state of readiness. We must be alert and faithful. It is urgent every single day, one day at a time, that we should live as though Christ is coming back today. That Jesus regards this advice as highly important cannot be overstated. It is so important that Jesus followed the two powerful illustrations of chapter 24 with two additional powerful illustrations in chapter 25, each of which stresses the importance of being ready for when Jesus returns. We are looking today at the first parable in chapter 25, the parable of the ten virgins.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main idea of this parable is an alert whose importance is incapable of overemphasis. I was abruptly awakened in the middle of the night this week by one of those government alerts. Perhaps you were as well. Sad to later discover that a sheriff's deputy had been shot, but I picked up my phone to read that people living in the vicinity of 64th and Dixon should shelter in place because of an armed suspect in the area. Had I lived in that area I would have secured my dwelling. But as I live at least 80 blocks west, I felt I could ignore the alert without a real threat to my safety.

But the alert Jesus issues in this parable is one that no one can afford to ignore without subjecting themselves to the greatest imaginable threat to their own souls. The alert and the main idea of this parable is that you and I must absolutely be ready for the coming of Jesus Christ. The parable tells of certain individuals who were unprepared for the arrival of the bridegroom and they ended up being excluded from the wedding feast. It was a celebration that they wanted to be a part of, but they were refused admittance because they had failed to be properly prepared. They will hear the saddest, most horrifying words imaginable from the lips of Jesus, "I do not know you." Who are these and why are they rejected? These are questions we cannot afford to overlook.

So let's first, consider . . .

I. The Anticipation of the Bridesmaids.

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Wedding customs in that time and place involved three parts. There was first the engagement of a man and woman. Their parents would enter into contract for their children to be married. The engagement was followed by the betrothal in which the bride and bridegroom groom exchanged vows and were considered legally married. During this time the two would remain separated, and bridegroom would prepare himself and his house to support his wife and their family. When the preparations were complete, the bridegroom would proceed from his home to the home of the bride where she would be waiting for his arrival and would proceed with him in a grand procession, usually at night, to his home where there would be a wonderful banquet of celebration. The banquet would last for days, even up to a week at the end of which the couple would be alone for the first time and would consummate the marriage and live together as husband and wife in the house he had prepared.

The parable of the ten virgins is set at the point at which the bridegroom has alerted the bride that he is going to be coming to her house. She would be waiting there with her virgins, her bridesmaids,

her friends, to make the nighttime procession to his home with torches carried by the bridesmaids. The maids are honored to be part of this grand occasion. They assemble at the bride's home in anticipation of the arrival of the bridegroom, the grand procession, and the wedding feast at the bridegroom's home.

The anticipation of the bridesmaids depicts that of every person who comes to outward faith in Christ. Likewise they anticipate his arrival and escort to the place that he has prepared. Paul described the conversion of the Thessalonians this way: you turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. Jesus said, In my Father's house are many rooms . . . and I go to prepare a place for you . . . and I will come again to take you to myself that where I am there you may be also. Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our blessed hope, waiting for Jesus to come from heaven and take us home.

Next, notice . . .

II. The Distinction Between the Bridesmaids.

There are ten bridesmaids, and they share much in common. All were invited and look forward to the banquet. And outwardly they have responded. They all have lamps. Apparently all CALL Jesus Lord. However, there is a clear demarcation that distinguishes one half of the group from the other. Five bridesmaids were foolish and five were wise. The foolishness of the first five is obvious. It is silly to show up with a torch or a lamp to make a nighttime procession through town and not bring oil to fuel it. It is like going camping and taking a flashlight but no batteries. Unlike the foolish bridesmaids, the wise ones think ahead. It is clear that they will need oil to fuel their lamps and they want to make sure they have enough for whatever may occur. The wise virgins are prepared; they are ready. The foolish virgins are not.

The Bible presents as wisdom the act of thinking ahead and planning accordingly. For example, Proverbs urges the lazy person to consider the ways of the ant. "She prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest" (Proverbs 6:8). Proverbs also praises the one who sees danger ahead and takes appropriate action. Jesus exalts the builder who anticipates the storm and builds appropriately. And now he is instructing his listeners to be wise by making sure they are prepared for his coming. It is wise indeed to realize that one day we will all meet God. It is a staggering and solemn reality. Wisdom dictates that we be prepared for that day.

Third, consider . . .

III. The Delay of the Bridegroom.

The bridegroom's arrival did not take place as it might have been expected. Indeed he was coming but the time wore on as the company awaited his arrival. It was later than expected so they became drowsy and slept. The point here highlights what Jesus was saying there in chapter 24 that the timing of his coming will not be made known in advance, and apparently it will not be immediate. There would be an interval of time from his ascension to his return and people would be going about life as usual.

The point to be taken here is what Peter related in his second epistle. In the latter days, scoffers would will come. They will ridicule the idea that Jesus will actually return. Such scoffing should not shake the watchfulness and hope of Christ's followers. Remember that with the Lord a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. He is not slow about his promise. So hold on. Know that his purposes are good and hold on.

Next, we turn to . . .

IV. The Cry at Midnight.

At midnight there was a loud voice indicating the arrival of the bridegroom. Midnight indicates the climax of the night. Those awaiting the arrival were summoned to meet the bridegroom. He points us to Jesus and his glorious and exciting return at the climax of this age. Paul describes this glorious event for the Thessalonians. He writes, "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven WITH A CRY of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." He is coming back, my brothers and sisters! Are you ready? Are you watching? Because some will not be ready!

V. The Desperate Realization of the Foolish Bridesmaids.

Everybody gets ready. The bridesmaids trimmed their lamps. They would be removing the burnt parts of the wick so as to make the flame burn at its brightest. But at this point the foolish virgins notice their flames are flickering. There was perhaps some oil in the wick from its last use, but that has been quickly consumed and they brought no oil with them. They will have no light. Oops! But it is easily fixed, right? Just borrow from those who were wise enough to bring oil. However, the reply of the wise is, uh, "we can't do that. There is not enough for us both. Hurry, go get your own!"

It seems like at every wedding there is a last minute realization that some particular detail was overlooked. It was the case at my niece's wedding in September. While we were making final preparations to get ready and make our way to the venue, a call came to my uncle. Uh, we forgot about earrings! Would you go by the store on your way and pick up 7 pairs just alike?" The reply was something like, "Why don't you all just do without? You will match that way." The problem in the parable is it wasn't that they forgot the earrings; it was more like forgetting the dress. Without the oil for their lamps, they could not go. The maidens needed the oil for their lamps to burn for there to be an illuminated procession. And if the wise were to give the foolish their oil, then THEY would be in the category of the foolish. It was the responsibility of each to bring her own oil. So off the foolish went to try to find a seller of oil in the middle of the night.

Most middle schoolers and teenagers enjoy theme parks, and at that age I did too. My church youth group was scheduled to go to Six Flags over Georgia one Saturday back in the dark ages. And I was so looking forward to that trip. Atlanta was 3 hours away and we had to be early to meet at the church. I was depending on my mother to wake me up. And apparently she tried. The thing I remember, however, is that she came in and told me I had overslept and it was too late. In 5 minutes they would be pulling out of the church parking lot. My heart sank and my adrenaline kicked in. I jumped out of bed as though I could reverse time, put my clothes on, and pleaded "Could we just try?" We did and we got to the parking lot in the nick of time. When I think back though, the thing I remember more than anything else is the despair I felt momentarily, to think that I had missed out on something I had looked forward to for so long.

Such was not the case for the foolish virgins. There was not time enough for them. While they were away, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast. The simple but stunning words echo with despair: "And the door was shut." This language takes us back to Genesis. The animals filled the ark and after Noah and his family were safely onboard, the scripture says that the Lord shut him in. The door was shut and the rains of judgment fell. Just as

the people of Noah's day were shut out of the salvation of the ark, the foolish virgins were shut out of the wedding feast.

They made their way to the location of the feast on their own and sought to be admitted. Notice what they said. "Lord, lord, open to us." But the reply came with dire solemnity, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you." Does this interchange sound familiar? Does it not harken back to Matthew 7? There Jesus had warned, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

One pastor rightly entitled his message on this text: "Partially Prepared, Eternally Excluded." The message is to be ready for the coming of Christ or miss it altogether and be left out of the feast. And "almost prepared" won't make it. Either you are prepared or you are not. Do not think the deadline will come and you will be given extra time. Now is the time. Today is the day of salvation.

VI. The Lesson from the Foolishness of the Unprepared Bridesmaids

There is a critical lesson Jesus is teaching through this parable. Do not be like the foolish maidens! Do not be unprepared for His coming. If you are unprepared, you WILL miss out on the wedding banquet. You WILL be shut out of the kingdom of heaven. And if you are shut out, it WILL be eternally too late. So there remains a significant question. How can you be prepared? What is this lack of preparation?

Fundamentally, it is the same question as what the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas. What must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved! However, biblically, this belief is one that repents of sin. It submits to the Lordship of Jesus. It does not look to do great things IT wants to do in Jesus's name. It submits to the will of God.

The warning of Jesus here is similar to his warning from the sermon on the mount when he exhorted the masses to enter by the narrow gate. The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are MANY. Even the foolish can enter by the wide gate. They think it leads to the kingdom but they are mistaken. You see, the foolish bridesmaids represent not the wicked out there who overtly and clearly reject Christ. Those individuals are not showing up in anticipation of the coming of the bridegroom. They are not looking for the promise of the wedding banquet or a place prepared for them by Christ. No, those have rejected the bridegroom. But the bridesmaids ARE looking for him. The problem is that five of them are foolish. These are those who presume upon Jesus but do not obey him. They are like the foolish builder who hears what Jesus says but does not do it. They don't bring oil to the procession. They lack a true change of heart.

There are so many outward things people can do—like respond to a gospel invitation, join a church, even believe in Jesus's second coming. You can do these things without truly repenting of sin and submitting in your heart to him. Many will allegorize the oil to be representative of the Holy Spirit and it is enticing to do so because the changes that come about in one who is prepared to meet the Lord are brought about by his work. He regenerates. He empowers. He assures. But the point of the parable is for you to see that you are properly prepared through genuine saving faith in Jesus. The warning is against thoughtless/foolish presumption that does not bend to the will of God. That is the person who has been born again, justified in Christ, adorned with the garments of salvation,

and reconciled to God. These are assured that they will proceed with Christ to the dwelling he has prepared for them, whom he has known from the foundation of the world.

Conclusion

Back in November I received an offer from one of my credit cards. If I were to charge X number of dollars on that card that month, they would give me a credit of \$100. The charge amount was reasonable. Christmas gifts would gobble that up in a hurry. I activated offer. It wasn't a card I use all the time, so I had to make an intentional effort to use it. I checked a couple times in the month and knew I was well on my way. And in my mind I had made several more charges that fulfilled the requirement for the bonus. But then the bill came. I said to myself, "I am going to open up this baby and find my \$100 reward." But as I scanned over the statement I quickly noticed a problem. I had failed to spend the required amount by \$17!!! And it was two days AFTER the end of the month. It took me two days to get past the disappointment. If only I had got that last tank of gas on that card? If only . . . But it was too late.

What would the company have said if I had called them and asked them to extend the offer and let me make just one more purchase? "Sorry sir, the promotion is over. You knew the terms." "Yes I did, and I failed to pay close enough attention."

It is striking that in the parable only HALF of the bridesmaids were wise and fully HALF of them were foolish in the most catastrophic of ways. Could it be that half of professing Christians are really false? Well, truly it is reflected in Jesus' statements about the two ways that MANY take the wide road and few take the narrow. He also stated that the number of those who cry out, "Lord, Lord" on that day will not be few but will be MANY. This is a warning which cannot be taken lightly. I am passing it on to you this morning with the hope that there would be none from Grace Community Church who hear those awful words on that day.

If you profess Christ but do not hunger for righteousness, do not really love God, do not truly seek to do the will of God, do not bother to spend time reading God's word and communing with him through prayer, do not mourn over your sin, YOU especially should go NOW and get your oil before he comes and it is eternally too late.

Warning passages like this one are not here to cause doubt among those who are represented by the wise bridesmaids. You just glance to see that you brought oil to the watch and lift up your heads because he IS coming to take us home to the place he has prepared. His desire is to have us with him, that where he is there we may be also. What a day that will be!