

The parable of the ten bridesmaids * Matthew 25:1-13
November 5, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Did you know... that there are only fifty days left until Christmas? That's right, Christmas is exactly fifty days from today.

Now here's a question: who's got all their Christmas shopping done? Who's STARTED their Christmas shopping? Who's planning to leave all their shopping until Christmas Eve??

Now imagine that fifty days pass and you do nothing to get ready; it would be a pretty sad situation on Christmas morning if you weren't ready. When you know something important is coming, you get ready for it, right?

That's the point that Jesus is making in the parable that we're looking at today. But in this case, it's not just Christmas that's coming; Jesus is looking to His return and saying: 'you know it's coming; you'd better get ready.'

Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 25, Matthew 25 and we'll start right off the top at verse 1.

Matthew 25:1 "At that time...

Well, immediately, the first question that we need to answer is 'at WHAT time?' Jesus says 'this parable is describes what it will be like 'at that time; what IS that time?'

To answer that question, just scan through chapter 24; this portion of Scripture – Matthew 24-25 – is sometimes called 'the Olivet Discourse' because this is Jesus' teaching about the end of things on the Mount of Olives (24:3) and there's a pretty central theme running through the whole thing. See if you can pick it out.

Verse 27: 27 For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Mat 24:27 NIV).

Verse 30: They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. (Mat 24:30 NIV).

Verse 37: 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

Verse 39: 39 ... That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. (Mat 24:37-39 NIV).

Verse 42: 42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Verse 44: 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (Mat 24:42-44 NIV).

What's the central theme? Jesus' return. The coming of the Son of Man.

So when Jesus starts off His parable with 'at that time,' He means 'When I return, it will be like this.' When Jesus comes back, it will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

The parable continues:

- 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise.
- 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.
- 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.
- 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

Let's talk about what's happening here. We don't have a ton of evidence for what weddings were like in Jesus' time and scholars differ on some of the details, but the basic pattern seems to be this.

The bride starts at her parents' house and the groom starts at his parents' house. Instead of walking the aisle though, the bride and her family travel in procession to the groom's house where the marriage takes place. After that, everybody but the groom and some of the guys (fathers and brothers) go back to the bride's house to get the wedding feast ready and the expectation is that it will be dark when the groom comes back and so the bridesmaids' job is to go out with torches to meet them halfway.

This actually happened in our neighbourhood this summer. There are a lot of Indian families in our neighbourhood and I guess there was a marriage between two households. There were two houses all decked out in serious decorations and drapes for about a week and then there was this procession from the one house in one part of the neighbourhood all the way up to the other. For real, there were three guys playing drums, women in colourful, flowing wraps dancing and singing, all the way from one house to the other.

That's what's going on here. There is a wedding going on and a procession from one house to the other and since it's late, the bridesmaids are supposed to go out to meet the groom with torches halfway.

But, here's the thing: in the world of the parable, the groom was REALLY late. (Somebody brought some fine Cuban cigars or something). And because the groom was delayed, all the virgins got drowsy and fell asleep. (They must have gotten into the wine back at the dinner).

6 "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

7 "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.

We're talking torches here that you'd splash oil on to keep them burning.ⁱ Half of the girls had brought extra oil so they were fine, but the other half were standing there looking at their torches flickering out like me trying to make a FaceTime call on 5% battery.

8 The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

9 " 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

Now some people might say 'the wise ones should have shared with the foolish ones' but I think there are two reasons why that doesn't float. First off, look at the language Jesus uses to describe these hypothetical characters – there's some that are *wise* and there's some that are *foolish*. The fools are not

the ones that don't share; the fools are the ones who didn't prepare. And second, it would have been an insult to the groom's family to have all the torches run out before they got back to the feastⁱⁱ and so the wise virgins say 'sorry, but it's better to have five torches with light than ten that don't.'

And so the unprepared virgins head off to buy some oil. Now, I know you're thinking 'where are they going to get oil at midnight?' but remember this is pre-industrial, pre-consumerist little town; everybody 'knows a guy' – he's probably at the feast – and so they go off to buy some oil.

10 "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. [The ones who were ready got to go to the party]. And the door was shut.

11 "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'

12 "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

That's a stark rejection isn't it? The ones who were ready get into the party; the ones who were not, don't. The message is as clear as this rejection is blunt: you gotta be ready.

'But hold on, this doesn't make any sense,' you might say. 'Why would the groom or the doorman say "I don't know you"? They are literally part of the wedding party!'

Well, that's because when Jesus says 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you,' He's talking to people who know He's coming but do nothing to get ready. Verse 12 is already shifting from the world of the parable to our own world. You know when you wake up during a dream and realize that something in the real world was connected to something in the dream? (I once dreamt that I pulled the door off our brand new family van; I woke up and realized that I had pulled the bookshelf down off the dresser next to the bed).

That's what's happening here. As the parable wraps up, Jesus is shifting into the real world and saying to us: 'If you're not ready when I return, I tell you the truth, I will close the door and say I don't even know you.'

That's why He closes off this passage with verse 13: "Therefore (in light of what it will be like when I return) keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. (Mat 25:13 NIV).

Those who are ready get into the party. Those who are not don't.

That's a pretty stark message, isn't it? Unless you are ready when Jesus returns, you're not getting into the Kingdom. I wish I could tell you something different, but that's what Jesus says, isn't it? The wise virgins got ready, they get into the party; the foolish ones didn't. If we're going to be wise, we need to get ready in order to avoid the fate of the foolish ones.

But that being said, I think we also need to think about this from the wise virgins' point of view too. Jesus' emphasizes the warning – get ready – but there is a motivating truth built into this parable too.

The Kingdom of God – our eternal dwelling place – will be like a wedding feast. It will be like a party for the ages. Again and again, the Bible makes that point:

Isaiah 25:6-8: 6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine-- the best of meats and the finest of wines.

7 On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; 8 he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

(Isa 25:6-8 NIV).

Revelation 19:7-9: 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.... 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' (Rev 19:7-9 NIV).

I mean, Jesus Himself says (Matthew 22:2): 2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

Eternity with God is going to be a party for the ages where we will eat abundant food that makes five star dinners seem like Play-Dough, where we will be surrounded by friends and family and loved ones and saints from the ages, where we will dance and not grow weary and sing and not grow faint. Dick Archer's going to be up on a table dancing with his tie tied around his head like Rambo. Our hearts overflow with joy, being in the very presence of God every moment of every hour.

I want to be there. I want you to be there.

That's why verse 10 is so important: those who were ready got into the party.

I want you to be there; I don't want you to get left out. So how do we get ready?

Well, to be completely honest, I think that technically the parables that come after this one, that we're going to look at in the next couple of weeks, answer that question, so I'll try to tie those back into this message. But for today, I just want to think about how you get ready for a party to think about how you get ready for Jesus' return.

Ok, you're getting ready for a party. What do you do?

You get cleaned up. You get dressed up. You get readied up.

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Let me explain.

If you're going to a party, you gotta get cleaned up.

Many of you come from farming households so you'll probably identify with this. I remember when I was a kid, there was this routine in our household when mom and dad went out. Dad would be out at the barn, doing the chores, taking care of the animals and then he'd come in and get cleaned up. He wouldn't go out with all the sights and smells of the barn lingering on him; he'd hop in the shower and get cleaned up.

Same for us. We get cleaned up for the eternal party.

But here's the thing: no amount of soaping and scrubbing can get rid of the stain of sin that sets in when we choose to put our own will against God's. You can lather, rinse, repeat all you want but no human effort can erase that stain. We need a supernatural power to step in and clean us up and make us new.

And it just so happens that the One who told this parable is the One who cleans us up.

Colossians 1:22-24:

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

Jesus offers to clean us up.

How do we respond to that invitation? By faith. By humbly acknowledging, 'Yes Jesus I recognize my sin and I recognize that it weighs me down, so I pray that you would forgive me and renew me and help me to follow You.' And when we do that, Jesus cleans us up.

And notice, each of the bridesmaids were responsible for their own actions. The five foolish ones couldn't count on the wise ones to spare them some oil; when Jesus comes back, we're not going to be able to borrow from our friends' faith or our parents' faith. We are each responsible to respond to Jesus' offer of salvation for ourselves.

If you've done that, you've done the first part of getting ready. You got cleaned up.

But... it's not enough to get cleaned up and just go back to the way you were; no, the next step is getting dressed up.

To carry the picture forward; you've come in from the barn or the workshop or the workout or whatever, you've gotten cleaned up; you don't put your sweaty old clothes back on once you've got cleaned up. Right? You get dressed up. You dress yourself in clothing that fits the occasion.

Same for us: when we experience the grace of God, we live in ways that reflect that grace.

Colossians 3:9-11 Paul says:

9 ... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Since Jesus has cleaned you up, live in a way that reflects that.ⁱⁱⁱ

If you've been around the Church for a while, you'll probably know that Jesus actually tells a parable where a king actually invites people to a banquet but they refuse to wear the royal robes that he provides for them. That's this. We get cleaned up and we get dressed up, clothing ourselves and living with the compassion, kindness and patience of the Kingdom.

We get cleaned up, we get dressed up, we get readied up.

This is a word I've learned from playing video games with the kids; when you're getting ready to play together, you wait in an online lobby with your friends and then you press a button to 'ready up.' That means that you're committed to playing the next round. Now's not the time to go the bathroom, now's not the time to go prepare a snack; if you've readied up, you've set your mind to taking part in what's coming next.

We 'ready up' for the Kingdom. We live in line with the reality that Jesus IS coming back and we DO what we need to do to get ready. I remember just before Ben was born, I was in the grocery store buying milk and I looked at the little tag and I remember thinking 'Ben will be here before this day.' I wasn't booking a vacation, I wasn't heading out of town on business; my mind and heart were fixed on the reality that this wonderful day was coming, when I would meet my son and start into the next stage of life.

David Platt is helpful here. He writes: "Christ's second coming should be on our minds and in our hearts, not in such a way that we stop everything we're doing and sit still, but in such a way that it affects everything we're doing. Our thinking about Him is not forced; it's a result of love. When Christ is on your mind, you can't wait to see Him."^{iv}

That's what it means to 'ready up' for the Kingdom. We look forward to it. We build our lives around it. We wait with the expectation that Jesus will return and we live with the confidence that since He died and rose to make us ready, we'll BE ready and welcomed into the party when He returns.

To prepare for Jesus' return, we get cleaned up, we get dressed up and we get readied up.

Are you cleaned up? Dressed up? Readied up?

Get ready for the party of eternity by getting cleaned up, dressed up and readied up.

This passage will be forever in my mind tied to one of my earliest experiences in seminary. It was my very first test, Church History 101, and the professor, who talked like Reverend Lovejoy from the Simpsons – very southern drawl pastor kind of guy – he handed out the exam questions on a sheet of paper and said 'get to it.' And about half of us in the class looked around like 'we didn't bring any paper.'

At WLU where I was TA'ing you don't take paper into the exam room – that's an obvious way of cheating – but the professor went 'like the foolish virgins who didn't bring enough oil for the wedding feast.' And he got us paper.

But I would argue that he was actually applying this passage incorrectly. (Not that I told him that that day). We didn't know that we were supposed to bring paper.

But YOU know that Jesus is coming back. And YOU know that Jesus is going to welcome all who are ready into the eternal party and leave out all those who squander their lives now living for themselves.

Those who are ready get into the party so get cleaned up, get dressed up and get readied up.

BENEDICTION

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

ⁱ “The “lamps” (not the same word as in 5:15) are here either small oil-fed lamps or, more plausibly, torches whose rags would need periodic dowsing with oil to keep them burning” (Don Carson, *Matthew-Mark*, Revised Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verse 1. Digital).

ⁱⁱ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 599; Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT), 917.

ⁱⁱⁱ Klyne Snodgrass is helpful here. He writes: ‘Readiness is an attitude, a commitment, a lifestyle, living in ways that comport with the character of the Kingdom’ (*Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables*, 518).

^{iv} David Platt. *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary). (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. Loc 6205). Note too Frederick Bruner who quotes J. Wellhausen in *The Churchbook (Matthew 13-28)*, 547: “The two kinds [of Christians] are... ‘the eager Christians who direct their life to Jesus’ Second coming and... the lazy Christians who, of course, believe in the Second Coming, but who meanwhile in fact do nothing to prepare themselves for it.’”