

The Parables of Jesus Week 4: Ready or Not – Matthew 25:1-13 **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (July 25, 2021)**

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service today. This is our fourth week looking at parables. So far, we've looked at the parable of the Samaritan, the workers in the vineyard, and the lost sheep. We've seen that the parables are stories intended to bring conviction and drive truth home. To make them effective for us today, our task is to learn the intended lesson and then translate that into our current context.

Turn with me to Matthew 25 for our parable for today. I'll read from verse 1 to verse 13.

25 ¹ "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 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 ones, 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.

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. 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.'

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. And the door was shut.

¹¹ "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'

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

¹³ "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

One of my favorite things as a pastor is to officiate weddings. It's wonderful to see a couple come together and commit to a life together, and to be a part of that milestone. Weddings are also one of the ways you best experience the differences between different cultures.

I was once a groomsman at a wedding for my friend in Taiwan. We had to ask some questions and do several challenges to pick up the bride and take her to the wedding. At one point, I had to listen to a Chinese pop song on headphones and then sing it, so that the groom could figure out the song. It was terrible, one of the more awkward experiences I've ever had. For some reason, he was unable to figure out the song based on my rendition. The bridesmaids also grilled the groomsmen about how the groom would care for and treat the bride after they were married, and one of the questions was how the groom might take care of the bride when she was expecting a baby. One of the other American groomsmen said he would get her ice cream, and there was an audible gasp from everyone in the room. They were horrified at the idea, and we had to do pushups as a penalty. We learned that in Chinese culture, it is very inappropriate for a pregnant woman to eat cold things.

This story that Jesus told is relying on some cultural conventions that may be confusing to us today. One aspect is still quite similar – having a procession of young women, often unmarried, in your bridal party. At this time, a wedding would usually take place in three stages. The first stage would be the formal engagement of the couple, which would be organized by the bride’s family. BG’s cultural tradition is very similar, and BG and I did that process two months before we did our church wedding. The second stage is the wedding ceremony, and then the third and final stage is the wedding banquet, which could be the same day or even a week later. This story is happening after the wedding ceremony while they are waiting for the wedding banquet to begin. Here’s perhaps how the parable could look today:

There was a wedding, and the ceremony had just finished. The full bridal party went off to take pictures. The bridal party finished with their pictures and were waiting for the bride and groom to take the rest of theirs. As they were waiting, they got tired and some fell asleep. The pictures dragged on, as the bride and groom took every possible pose and background. Some had some energy drinks with them, but the others didn’t. A few went into the church to lie down as they waited. Others rested right by the parking lot. Eventually, the bride and groom finished up and returned to the SUVs they would use to drive to the reception. The ones who were ready jumped into the vehicles and they all drove away. The others were left behind, and when they woke up, they found a way to the reception but it was too late. The wedding planner would not let them in and they missed the reception. Therefore keep watch, because we don’t know when Jesus will return.

The main point of this parable is clear:

1) Get ready for Jesus to return.

The main point of this parable is that we must be ready whenever Jesus returns. The context of this story is during Jesus’s discourse about his final return. At the beginning of Matthew 24, the disciples ask him, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” He gives them an extended answer, listing several signs, including this parable.

The Bible is crystal clear that we cannot know the day or the hour of Jesus’ return. In Matthew 24, that exact phrase is repeated four times, and then again in our passage in chapter 25. You would think that repeating something five times over would be unnecessary right? And that after you had said it five times, that it would be clear. But we still keep putting dates to the return of Christ.

I grew up listening to the radio ministry of Harold Camping on Family Radio, and he predicted that Jesus would come back in 1994. Then he predicted it would happen in 2011. Did that get much media coverage here? I know he was based in Oakland. In Kenya, it did, and a lot of people were talking about it. I remember the first Sunday after the predicted rapture how the people giving announcements at church came out to the stage to check who was still left.

Obviously, both times he was wrong. Following his second failed prediction, Camping wrote a letter, and said this:

We have learned the very painful lesson that all of creation is in God’s hands and He will end time in His time, not ours! We humbly recognize that God may not tell His people the date when Christ

will return, any more than He tells anyone the date they will die physically.
(<https://www.charismanews.com/us/32958-harold-camping-admits-rapture-prediction-was-sinful-statement>)

He was not the first either, and church history is full of failed prophecies of when Jesus would return. Every generation since the time of Jesus has seen evidence that they may be the final generation. Part of the reason that we feel so driven to answer this is that it feels like it has been taking a while. This tendency was predicted in scripture. Here is what the Apostle Peter said in his letter:

3 Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. 4 They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

A few verses later he says: 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

The biggest challenge in this story is the delay. The bridesmaids didn't know when the groom would be back, and they didn't know how much oil they would need for their lamps. The wise bridesmaids got extra oil just in case, but the foolish ones did not. Are you equipped for a delay?

One of the questions that come up when looking at this parable is what the oil represents. Some people have said it represents anointing or the Holy Spirit, as oil usually does, but this doesn't necessarily work in this story. Some have said it is good works. But you can't just go out and buy more good works, or more Holy Spirit, so that doesn't seem to work within the story. I think we don't need to figure out an exact meaning or representation of the oil, that it is just whatever we need to be ready.

One of our favorite recent songs is Help is On the Way by Toby Mac. It is Amara's favorite song, and she gets so excited whenever 'Goby Mac' comes on the radio. Here are some of the lyrics from that song:

It may be midnight or midday
It's never early, never late
He gon' stand by what He claimed

No matter when, we need to be ready. One of the other images that are regularly used for the return of Jesus is that it will be like a thief in the night. I wouldn't have used that metaphor myself, but it does make the point that it will be unexpected. **Therefore, keep watch. Get ready for Jesus to return.**

2) Our faith can't be transferred.

In the parable, the foolish bridesmaids who ran out of oil asked the other bridesmaids to share. They refused. This may seem selfish, but if they had given their oil, then they would have all run out. For the banquet to happen, they needed to have light, and it seems that the bridesmaids were the ones providing it. When the five unprepared bridesmaids went to go buy more, they missed the key moment when they were needed.

In our life, sometimes we may rely on someone else's faith. You may have grown up going to church, and you could see that your parents were very devout and committed, and you've trusted that this would automatically carry over to you. Perhaps your wife is the one who brings you to church or keeps the family grounded on matters of faith. But as important as community is to our faith, it is also a choice and a commitment that each of us must make. No one can surrender your life for you. No one else can live your Christian walk for you. And when the time comes, you won't be able to depend on someone else's experience of the Holy Spirit, or trust in Jesus, or the actions and good works that indicate the faith of God active in you. You will need to be prepared and to be ready with your own faith. **Therefore, keep watch.**

3) The door of salvation will shut.

Last month, Pastor Bruce preached about an open door from Revelation 3. I've also preached on this passage, and this is a great image of the opportunities that God prepares and facilitates for us. But an important lesson from this parable is that the door of salvation will not always be open.

Verses 10-12 are heartbreaking. 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. And the door was shut. 11 "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' 12 "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'" As a literal statement, it is hard to imagine how that could be true, if they were playing a role in the wedding banquet. She'd be like, Seriously, "Seriously, I'm Stacy, we've met like 6 times. I went to middle school with your wife. I was at the rehearsal dinner last week and sat right behind you." But this is in line with other parts of scripture that indicate that some people believe themselves to be followers of God, but God does not know them. They call him Lord, but He never knew them.

A couple of weeks ago, I got to see Jo Myers in the hospital just before she passed away, and it gave me a lot of think about. I realized that some of the last words she ever heard was my message that morning. It made me think and reflect on what truly matters. What is it that we're doing now that will last into eternity? Our faith matters, and it does make a difference. How we treat people matters, how we treat our family, and the love we show to others. The work that we do also matters, and we're called to do all that we do with excellence and to do it for God. None of us know how many more days we have. Don't wait until it is too late to do what is important, especially in matters of faith and getting right with God, and right with other people.

As Christians, the future brings hope for us. We know that God will make all things right. You can anticipate the return of Jesus with joy and This was the conclusion that Peter made in his letter: "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

God's delay is what allows us to continue on our mission. Last week we looked at the mandate of reaching the lost. We don't know how much time we have. We don't know if a conversation we have may be the last one with someone.

If you're here today or listening online, and you've never taken the step of accepting Jesus as your Lord and savior, today you have that opportunity. You can do that right now because today is the day of salvation. Joseph and the team will come back to do a final song, and then I'll close in prayer.