



Whether in the ancient world of Jesus' day or in today's world, weddings are occasions of great joy. One of the privileges of being a pastor is getting to be a part of weddings. I've been involved in large and elaborate weddings of several hundred people, as well as in small and simple weddings of just five or six. I've officiated weddings in churches, backyards, wineries, grand hotels, living rooms and beaches. It doesn't matter where they are or how much they cost, they're always a celebration.

This has always been true. In Jesus' day the wedding celebration lasted an entire week. Friends and relatives were given time off work so they could enjoy the festivities. It's not all that much different today. A recent survey revealed the average wedding in America today costs \$28,000. But, unlike today, in Bible times the groom's family was responsible to pay for the whole thing. Having paid for two daughters to get married, I think I was born in the wrong place and the wrong time!

This morning we come to a parable about the time leading up to a week-long wedding celebration that would involve an entire Palestinian village. It's an event everyone has been waiting and preparing for: mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, not to mention the bride and groom and their attendants. But in the story, something goes terribly wrong. Listen as I read Matthew 25:1–13.

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

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

"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

"'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.'

"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.

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

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

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

The Context of this Parable Reveals it is About the Lord's Return

In examining a story like this, we should always look at the context in which it was told. In the chapter before this, Jesus was talking about his own return and the events leading up to it. He described things like the Great Tribulation and the rise of the Antichrist. He also said no one, not even he knows the exact time of his return. Because of that, we need to be ready; we need to be prepared and watchful. Just before this parable he told a story about a wicked servant who was put in charge of his master's house while he was gone. He figured his master would be away a long time so he sat around and boozed it up and mistreated his fellow servants. But the master came home unexpectedly, saw what he'd been doing, and threw him out. Jesus said, *"Therefore keep watch, because you don't know on what day your Lord will return"* (24:42). This is pretty much the same thing he said at the end of this parable in verse 13. But there's a slight difference. The problem of the wicked servant was the surprisingly quick return of his master for which he wasn't ready, but in this story about the ten maidens the problem is one of delay. Five of these young ladies weren't ready because of the long delay of the groom.

The Parable Takes Place at a Middle Eastern Wedding Feast

This fits with what we know about Middle Eastern weddings of that day. The delay of the bridegroom was not unusual. Let me explain. As I said, in Jesus' day weddings were a week-long celebration. It all started when the groom would come with his groomsmen to the bride's home to bring her back to their new home. This event was surrounded with great pageantry and drama. The bride would ask a number of her friends to be what we call bridesmaids. Their job was to wait with her for the groom to arrive and be part of this joyous procession with the bride and groom from her old house to her new house. This procession always took place at night, so part of what these bridesmaid did was carry lamps or torches to light the way. One of the things that made all of this so fun was that the bride didn't know exactly when the groom would arrive at her home with his

friends. Sometimes this was because last minute negotiations were being made between the respective families concerning the terms of the marriage.

But you can see in this particular wedding the groom was especially delayed in getting to the bride's home, and so all the bridesmaids fell asleep. That wasn't the real problem though. The real problem was five of them didn't bring enough oil to keep their lamps lit through the night. So when the groom finally showed up they weren't prepared to do their job and lead the procession back to the groom's house, and they paid dearly for that. Their lack of preparation would keep them from entering into the joy of the wedding feast.

What does our Lord want us to learn from this parable?

Each of Our Stories Will End with an Encounter with Jesus

One of the things we learn here is how each of our stories will end. Each will end with a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. He's the bridegroom. He's the One we're waiting for. Jesus stands at the end of history. It's like we know the end even before we get there.

Lynn and I have always enjoyed watching mystery movies. What we've learned is there are really two ways these stories develop. One way is for the person who did it to not be revealed until the end of the story. The crucial piece of information is withheld until a final courtroom confession is made, like in the old *Perry Mason* TV shows. But there's another way to tell the story, and that's when you see the crime in the opening scene of the movie so you know who did it from the start. The drama and tension in the rest of the movie is to watch how some detective or lawyer figures out who did it and holds him accountable. Some of you may recall that's how the old *Columbo* TV shows used to be written.

The question is, what kind of story is your story and my story? This parable tells us something about the end of our story. Whatever else happens along the way, we'll end there, before the bridegroom. That can help us in a couple of ways. If you're in right relationship with him, that can give you courage. If you know how the story ends with him welcoming you into the wedding feast, you can face whatever comes your way. It's like when you hop on a roller coaster. You can hop on with confidence and courage because despite all the twists and turns and loops you know you're going to arrive safely back where you started. If you know the end, then the operation you may be facing, or the job loss you just encountered, or the trouble you're having with your child, can all be endured. I may not know the partial endings to all these mini-stories in my life, but I know the ending to the big story and that gives me courage. To know the end can also give us balance. Without this vision of the end, we tend to live unbalanced lives. What I mean by that is we place ultimate value on

that which really only has relative value. We make idols out of things like work and success and even relationships. Good things that are in fact gifts from God become things we cling to for security and significance. But when we realize in the end none of those things will matter we can put them in proper perspective.

For Some the End Will be an Occasion of Remorse and Sorrow

But in this story it's also clear not everyone's story will end well. Five of the bridesmaids weren't prepared for the coming of the groom. For some reason, they didn't plan on him taking so long. It's not that they didn't care about the bridegroom; they just weren't ready for the long wait through the night and were caught off guard when he showed up, without enough oil to light their lamps. Later, after the joyful procession had left and entered the groom's house, they were kept out of the wedding feast. They were too late. The door was shut and despite their pleading they weren't allowed in.

One of the things we can learn from this is his coming will seem delayed to us. It will seem to take an awful long time for him to show up. Throughout history people have mocked the Christian faith because despite our expectations for Jesus to come at any time he still hasn't shown up for over 2000 years. But Jesus warns us ahead of time in this story there will be a long delay and we must be prepared for that.

Sadly, the parable tells us there will be some who won't be prepared for the long wait. They'll be caught off guard when the critical moment comes and it will be too late to do anything about it. Then there will be a separation between the wise and the foolish. There's no getting around this. We might like to think God is so merciful that somehow they'll get a second chance, but Jesus leaves no room for that here. Tennyson wrote a poem about the terrible reality of being late to the wedding feast:

Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!

Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.

Too late, too late! you cannot enter now.

No light had we: for that we do repent;

And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.

Too late, too late! you cannot enter now.

No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!

O, let us in, that we may find the light!

Too late, too late: you cannot enter now.

Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?

O, let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!

No, no, too late! you cannot enter now.

That's a haunting poem but it communicates something of the sorrow and remorse of those who aren't prepared to meet the bridegroom. They're too late because they aren't prepared.

Despite the Long Wait We Must be Prepared Now

We don't know when he'll return. Peter once wrote, *"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day"* (2 Peter 3:8). The wise virgins were prepared for the groom's arrival. They'd brought enough oil to last through the night. What does it mean for us to be prepared now?

One of the things it doesn't mean is all you do is think about his return. There are some people like that. They become so preoccupied with the soon return of Christ they neglect the everyday realities of life. That's not what Jesus is asking for in the parable. Notice something intriguing about the story: all ten of these young women slept. There's nothing in this story to indicate that was the problem. Both the wise and the foolish girls slept. This underscores the fact that those who are prepared are expected to be involved in normal, everyday life (sleeping and eating and changing diapers and showing up for work). When Jesus says, "Keep watch" at the end of the story he doesn't mean we should drop all of those things. Meals still need to be cooked, fences still need to be fixed, bills still need to be paid. Being prepared will still involve all of that.

One of the things this parable shows us is being prepared is an individual matter. Look how the five foolish girls scrambled when they discovered they didn't bring along enough oil. And notice they tried to borrow some from the other's without success. That means we can't borrow from someone else's oil when it comes to being prepared. The outcome of that final meeting is an individual matter. We can't ride into heaven on someone else's spiritual coattails. We won't be able to say, "Well, my wife is the spiritual one in the family. I depend on her when it comes to the whole God thing." That won't work. Or we won't be able to say, "My parents raised me in a Christian family. My grandfather was a pastor. I've sort of inherited their faith." We won't be able to say, "Well, I hang out with the right people. They had oil in their lamp." That won't work. To those who try to borrow from someone else's preparedness the bridegroom won't say, "Come on in. I knew your parents." Instead, he'll say the same thing he said to the foolish virgins, "I don't know you." The question is, Do **you** know him?

Those are very telling words: "Truly I tell you, I don't know you." It's clear a real relationship with the Lord hasn't been established. How does that happen? It happens as you and I choose to accept the gift of God, which is the offer of forgiveness and new life through Christ. To do that you have to turn away from the way you've been living and surrender control of your life to him. This is a very personal thing. No one can do this for you. In

John's gospel we read this, *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son"* (John 3:17-18). That's an individual thing; no one can do that for you.

But that's not all. To be prepared, we also have to constantly nourish our life of faith. In this story, the need for oil is a continuing need. Our life in Christ needs to be continually replenished. We can't light the lamp of our Christian life once and then never attend to it again. It needs to constantly be attended to. Imagine someone getting married and then thinking since they've already walked down the aisle they don't need to replenish, renew and cultivate their relationship with their wife or husband. Eventually, that person will discover they have no marriage at all. It's the same in our relationship with God. That relationship must be cultivated and replenished. We have to work at keeping our prayer life vital and maintaining communion and fellowship with God throughout the day. Things like gratitude and praise and even daily repentance and confession must be cultivated. We have to work at keeping the Bible from becoming a dry and ordinary book to us. We must work at staying in accountable relationships with others in the body of Christ. We must work at serving him: sharing our faith, using our spiritual gifts and helping those in need. We must work at bringing every aspect of our life under the scrutiny of His Lordship so that we long for his kingdom more than anything else. We do all of this as we go about the mundane business of our lives, but we can't be prepared unless we replenish our lamps.

When I was in Africa I became acutely aware of my own lack of patience. I've come to believe we Americans are the most impatient people in the world because we expect everything to work properly and everything we need to be at our fingertips. If our internet connection goes out, we think someone has personally violated our rights as human beings and we want it fixed now. If someone is five minutes late to a meeting, we're ready to give them our mind. But people who live in Africa must have patience because nothing works when you want it to. Several mornings I got up and turned on the water to take my shower and there was no hot water. And then one morning there was no water at all! Five minutes late? That's a big deal. In Africa a meeting at 8:00 means your show up anywhere between 8:00 and 9:00. Part of that is because everyone knows the things you need to do to get there by 8:00 may be impossible to do because nothing works. I spent four hours in the Turkish Airlines office at the airport trying to get three perfectly good credit cards to work so I could get on a plane early to be with my dad. I was livid, but the guy who worked there just kept shrugging his shoulders and saying, "It's Africa." The Africans get it. They're so patient. They wait for everything and they have fun in the process!

Why do I bring that up? Because patience is a virtue. Ecclesiastes 7:8 says, *“The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride.”* Patience, along with all of these other things I've mentioned, is oil in my lamp. And do you know what's great? Patience is a fruit of the Spirit. The wonderful thing about this is God gives us his Spirit to help us in all of this. We're not on our own in this work of replenishing. Jesus said, *“Abide in me, as I also abide in you”* (John 15:4). He abides in us through his Spirit he gives to us. It's no coincidence that oil is often a symbol of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. It's not just about us replenishing ourselves, but it's about letting him who abides within us replenish us.

Here's the bottom line: We're called to live our life in light of this one great reality—Jesus is coming again. Our work, our relationships, our vacations, our purchases must account for the reality that in the end knowing him is what matters most. I'm talking about a mindset; one that has an eternal perspective on life. So many of us live for the next big thing. It might be a job or a relationship or a house or a vacation or another child. Jesus is inviting us to live for something more; something that deep down we want more than anything else, and that's everlasting joy. Isn't this what a wedding feast is all about? Isn't this what all those who failed to be prepared wanted so much but missed out on? But don't be fooled. We can't have the best of both worlds. Charles Spurgeon once said, “He that follows the world with all his heart and thinks that the best, is a reasonable man in following it. But he who thinks the world to come the best, and yet follows this present evil world—why, what a fool is he, and who shall plead for him? When he stands before God, his prayers will damn him, if nothing else will, for his prayers will be swift witnesses against him that he did know, did feel, and yet he would not act on his knowledge.”

I've thought a lot about how we in the church ought to view this parable. There are some who'd see this parable about two classes of Christians, both of whom are assured of eternal life. There are the wise who are prepared for Christ's coming and there are the foolish who aren't. But I don't believe that's how we should understand this story. This story is about true and false Christians. True Christians are those who will be prepared; false

Christians are those who won't be. In this story, the girls who were shut out hung out with the right people and even seemed to really care about the bridegroom. In gatherings like this there are always those who are prepared and those who aren't. There are those who will enter into the joy of the wedding feast and those for whom the door will be shut. In many ways we all look alike. We eat, work, study, take care of our kids, go to church, pray and enjoy the outdoors. We're all alike in many ways. But one day there will be an event that will divide us right down the middle—five and five. Some of us are in extreme peril; others are not. Don't be fooled. Prepare yourself. Establish a relationship with the bridegroom and then work on replenishing and cultivating it, and live all of life in view of this one great reality that Jesus is coming back.

In many ways, telling this story is an act of tremendous grace on Jesus' part. He's allowing us to look at our lives from the perspective of the end. In doing so, he's giving us the opportunity to change course midstream, before it's too late. Few people have that opportunity.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the Swedish chemist, Alfred Nobel, awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper. It read, “Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a rich man.” In actuality, it was Alfred's brother who'd died and a newspaper reporter had bungled the epitaph. But, this had a huge impact on Nobel. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing the means to kill people more effectively and for being rich. So he initiated the Nobel Peace Prize, an award for scientists and writers who foster peace. Nobel said, “Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph midstream and write a new one.”

In many ways, that's what Jesus does for us here. He allows us a peek into two possible scenarios for our lives at the end. In doing so, he's giving the opportunity to change our epitaph. Are you prepared for the bridegroom? Is there oil in **your** lamp? If not, now is the time to get prepared.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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