



## Scripture & Sermon

Nov 8, 2020

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### Matthew 25:1-13

**25** “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. **3** When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; **4** but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. **5** As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. **6** But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ **7** Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. **8** The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ **9** But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ **10** And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. **11** Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ **12** But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ **13** Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

*Sustainer and Redeemer God,*

*Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.*

2020 has thrown a lot at us that we were not prepared for and had no idea we needed to prepare for. The parable describes the unprepared bridesmaids as foolish, but I think all of us can relate to them this year. How many times have you made it to your car to go out for errands or made it to the door of the store from your car and realized, “I forgot my mask!” And had to go back and pick it up. Once, Brennen and I made it all the way to meijer for me to realize I didn’t have a single mask with me and he had to go into Meijer, buy me a mask, and bring it back out to me in the car. That one definitely threw off our errands timeline a bit. When we show up at a store these days, the correct response is to put a pause on our plan and go back to get a mask to wear. In contrast, that response is perhaps where these Bridesmaids go wrong. Let’s explore this parable a bit to figure that out.

This passage brings us back to the end of Matthew, back to the interactions in the final days of Jesus's life on earth. At this point, these stories are said to be shared between Jesus and the disciples. So, these are instructions for the committed followers of Jesus, not the challengers, not the outsiders, but those who Jesus knows should be the most committed and wants to prepare them the best he can before they are left to their own devices.

The text of this morning is yet another parable. A story Jesus tells to teach a lesson. The cool thing about these parables is that they are stories that can have many different things to say depending on who reads it and when we read it. The Spirit can move in new ways depending on what is needed for the hearers in that moment. Many parables have a traditional interpretation or typical way they are discussed, but bringing a new perspective to them can breathe new life into them. That is what we are doing with today's parable. The typical way that this parable is discussed boils down to the lesson, Always be prepared for the coming of Christ! Maybe you know a song or two that are about keeping your lamps trimmed and burning, they are based on this parable! One of those songs came to my mind, but I realized it might not be a hymn but a song I sang in college choir. In this interpretation, the bridegroom represents Christ, the wedding banquet represents the celebration in heaven, and the bridesmaids represent the people in the church, followers of Jesus. So, don't be like those foolish women, always be over prepared, because your time to enter the Kingdom of Heaven could be at any time and you want to be welcomed in and not left in the cold unrecognized by Christ. This interpretation is not wrong, but can be a bit troubling. As I considered it this week, some of the unrealistic elements of the parable stood out to me and I also found some new things that breathed new life into this parable.

Overall, we can't know what would have stood out to the original hearers. We don't know what the wedding traditions in 1st Century Palestine would have been. I heard from some less official sources that it was typical for the bridegroom to show up in the middle of the night. I can believe that: coming when it's dark makes sense otherwise the bridesmaids wouldn't have needed lamps at all. That said, the scholarly sources that I looked at all said there is very little we can know about the traditions except that it would have been typical for the bridegroom to arrive and be welcomed by the wedding party similar to what is written. So, we can skim by the detail of the timing, except for the fact that no matter what the wedding traditions, there is no way those 5 ladies were going to find an oil dealer open and selling oil at past midnight. There wasn't a 24 hour Walmart in those times!

That detail aside, there are some bigger troubles for me as I read this parable. The main troubling part is the way the story concludes. In the way that Christ treats the foolish, that the five who went to get more oil are condemned for making a common mistake and trying to fix it and are not welcomed into the wedding banquet. The women labelled as foolish are equal to the other five in every way except that they didn't bring

enough oil to last for hours, to last long past the bridegroom was expected to show up, and that in an effort to fix that problem, left their post and missed the arrival of the Bridegroom. If we think of this parable's lesson as "Be prepared!" it sets a really high expectation for being prepared. It would be another thing if they forgot their lamps altogether, but ultimately they surely showed up with enough oil if the bridegroom had shown up on time, but he didn't, he's really the rude one here! It is like they are being punished for not being uber/over prepared beyond what was reasonably expected. Focusing on preparedness as the issue with the foolish bridesmaids contrasts with some of Jesus's other teachings in the book of Matthew and completely undermines Grace! It is just at the end of chapter 25, the chapter that this passage comes from, that Jesus says to the Disciples, "When you welcomed the least of these, you welcomed me." Wouldn't the women not lucky enough to grab excessive amounts of oil on their way out the door be the least of these in this story? Furthermore, excluding them for making a simple mistake and trying their best to fix it is not forgiving or merciful like Jesus encourages us to be. It makes me question what their mistake truly was. Is it really not having enough oil? When we look at the last line of the passage, Jesus gives a summarizing point that gives us a hint of what the lesson is supposed to be. Verse 13 says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." This is intriguing as all of the bridesmaids don't stay awake or alert. It says in verse 5, "As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept." None of them kept awake or alert. Being awake or alert is unrelated to them having enough oil in their lamps until the bridegroom showed up. The lamps seem to be part of the ritual of the wedding. So, we must ask, what are the foolish ones not alert to that the others were?

Perhaps to answer that question, we need to dig into what their mistake was a bit more. Thinking about those potential issues with this parable and what makes the foolish bridesmaids foolish, what was their mistake? What was it that really kept them from being welcomed into the banquet? Since it doesn't directly say in the text, we are allowed to conjecture and put the pieces together in different ways. If we boil down the story to the most basic, in the end, the biggest difference between the wise and foolish bridesmaids is not the oil, but that the wise were present when the bridegroom showed up and so could be welcomed in at the moment. Whereas the foolish bridesmaids had left. They were not present when the bridegroom arrived and welcomed everyone into the banquet. What if the foolishness is because they thought the oil and lit lamps were more important than their presence? The parable tells us that they woke up to the call that the bridegroom was arriving, and so they knowingly left knowing that he would be opening up the banquet soon. They were afraid that they didn't have enough oil and were afraid that they would not be accepted into the banquet if they did not have the ritual perfected. They believed that what they had was not enough. That seems like a deeper issue than just making a forgetful mistake, one that seems a bit more in proportion to the consequences.

It is a pretty relatable issue to have too. Have you ever felt like your lamp is low? Like your oil is low? I can't speak for all of you, but my answer is YES ALL THE TIME! Especially this year, jeez 2020 has been rough! There has been so much grief this year, so much stress and tension. I know my fuel gage has been feeling quite low and it would be easy to get wrapped up in worrying that I don't have enough oil left to keep pushing through to the end. To those of us who are worried, like the bridesmaids, that what we have is not enough to get us through, this parable is an encouragement to not give up but to be resilient and persevere so that we can join in on the joy when we get to that next chapter. This parable reminds us to hold onto our faith even as we get to the darkest parts of the journey. The bridesmaids left and then were kept out of the banquet because they were not willing to sit in the dark and wait it out with faith. Is our faith strong enough to stick around in the darkest moments and to trust that Christ will bring us out of it? Is your faith strong enough to keep awake your hope and trust that you will make it through? That you will feel God's presence again? That you will be enough for God? Enough to approach God?

Instead of a story of exclusion and a strict guest list for the banquet in heaven, this is a parable pushing us to not give up and leave our faith behind, to not underestimate our worthiness to welcome Jesus and be welcomed by Jesus. If the foolish act from the five bridesmaids is that their solution to not having enough oil was to leave behind the opportunity to welcome the Bridegroom, to welcome Jesus, then the lesson is to stay vigilant to our faith and be willing to come to Jesus no matter our shortcomings or mistakes. If we give up on our faith, we guarantee for ourselves that we will miss out on getting to welcome Jesus, if we give up and run off, then we guarantee that Jesus won't know us. Jesus teaches us to stick around to be known by him and become an equal part of the banquet. Jesus teaches us time and again that mercy and love are his ways. We should come to Jesus no matter our shortcomings or mistakes. God says to come and stay as we are, as unready, as low on oil as we are; no matter how energized and active in our faith we are or how exhausted and barely holding onto our faith we are. We never have to run and get more oil to show up to church or show up for God. God will invite us into the banquet no matter how dim our lamps, as long as we are there to come in. Let us hear this reminder to stay vigilant and hold onto our faith. If you are one with your lamp burning out, flickering and about to snuff out, persevere and still hold onto your faith as that is ultimately what is most important. If you are one with plenty of oil in your lamp, this parable also has a reminder for you. Share your lamp light with others, we are not on this faith journey alone, but in it together and we can share the light of Christ, the light of faith and perseverance with each other. Keep the faith brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter how low you can see your oil is getting. Don't give up on your faith just as God is not giving up on you.

*Let us Pray:*

*God, In the deepest darkness, in the times when all seems lost, we are not lost to you. You call us to be ready for your new kingdom, you call us to be alert to the health of our faith, and you call us to not give up on our faith when our oil burns low. God, help us in the moments where our lamps look like they are burning out and we don't know what to do, help us to remember to stick around and trust that you are always with us and you value us, our presence, more than being perfect when we welcome you into our lives. In your Son's name we pray, AMEN.*