

Matthew 25:1-13

“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.

## THE UNEXPECTED

Every week I counsel with someone who has had a tragically unexpected event occur in his or her lives.

Someone gets in trouble with the law. Someone is diagnosed with a deadly disease. A relationship comes to a tragic end. Someone loses a job. Someone loses a loved one.

And they always say the same thing, “It was such a shock. It was so unexpected.”

Isn’t it amazing how quickly our life can change? And sometimes when the big event comes we say,

“If only I had known this could happen I would have prepared. I would have done things differently.”

But, we can’t know. The big events of life come upon us like a thief in the night. Often they are a result of events that are beyond our control. In one sense you can’t plan for emergencies. They always happen spontaneously.

But, today’s lesson suggests that we can plan and prepare spiritually. We can do something before the time of crisis is upon us. We can fill up with the oil of faith so that we might find our way in the darkness.

## THE WEDDING PARABLE

That's what our lesson for today is all about. It is a story about preparing for the unexpected, that moment of decision that often comes in the middle of the night.

This story, of course is not to be taken literally. Nor are we supposed to analyze every detail to get some allegorical or hidden meaning. Instead, this is a parable, a parable about the kingdom of God.

This is, as I say so often, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

But, in order to understand the heavenly meaning we need to know a bit about the earthly story. This parable describes wedding customs that seem strange to us.

When we hold a wedding, we have a service at a specific time. Everyone marches in more or less at the appointed time and in the proper order. Afterward we take pictures and then go to a reception that lasts maybe a few hours.

## WEDDING SURPRISE

In those days they did things a bit differently. Weddings and the receptions that followed lasted a few days. And part of the "fun" was to start the party at an unexpected time.

The customs in the Middle East are similar even today. One commentator told of encountering ten young ladies playing a musical instrument as he entered a Galilean town.

The driver of his cab told him, as these young ladies danced in front of their car, that these were bridesmaids keeping the bride company until the bridegroom arrived.

When asked if it might be possible to see the wedding, the driver replied with a shrug, "Who knows? It might be tonight. It might be tomorrow. It might be the night after that. Nobody knows for certain."

He went on to explain that one of the great things to do at a wedding was to catch the bridal party napping. It was quite common for the bridegroom to come unexpectedly in the middle of the night with a man shouting in front of him saying, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming."

## A BAD SURPRISE

So weddings are kind of like surprise parties. But, in Jesus' parable the surprise is not so good, at least for some.

When the bridegroom came five bridesmaids were ready. They had extra oil for their lamp. And five bridesmaids were not ready. They had to go buy oil in the middle of the night.

And when they finally make it to the party, it's too late. The door is shut, and the unprepared bridesmaids are not allowed to attend the party.

And then Jesus concludes his parable by saying, "Wake up. The kingdom of heaven might be coming sooner than you think."

That's the important point. We need to wake up. We need to prepare.

The kingdom of heaven will come at a time that we do not expect.

### OIL CAN'T BE SHARED

Whenever we study this parable, someone always talks about the fact that the five wise bridesmaids didn't share their oil with the five foolish bridesmaids. They wonder why they were so selfish.

Didn't they know that it was nice to share with others?

But, once again, remember that this is a parable. It's not really about sharing oil in the middle of the night. It's about faith. It's about spiritual preparation. It's about getting ready for the kingdom of God.

Is it really possible to share with others when it comes to faith? It has been my experience that this is not possible.

No matter how much I might want another person to believe I cannot give them faith. They must discover it on their own. All of us must make our own spiritual preparations.

And we cannot prepare for the big moments of life at the last minute. When the time of testing comes in the middle of the night, you either have enough oil or you don't. You either have enough faith to meet the situation or you don't.

Tragically, I have spent a lot of time with foolish bridesmaids in my life. When the call comes they are not ready.

I try to share my oil. I try to share the gospel.

But, for those who are not prepared it doesn't seem to be enough. In the time of testing when the knock comes on the door in the middle of the night, it's really hard to hear good news.

The entire world is dark, and it is very hard for them to find their way. The door is shut, and the foolish bridesmaids find themselves on the outside looking in.

Faith is something that all of us must find for ourselves. It is not enough to be born in a “Christian” country. It is not enough to be born in a Christian home.

It is not enough to attend church and read the Bible.

At some point in our life we have to make a decision to follow Jesus. At some point in our life we have to make our own preparation for eternity.

How do we do that?

### SPECULATION

When you read modern popular literature about the kingdom that comes, it is not so much about preparation but speculation. People want to know the signs of the times. They want to know if they will be left behind.

There’s all manner of speculation about the kingdom that comes. There are some who even claim to know when Jesus (the bridegroom) is coming.

This gets some attention in the popular culture for a while. Recently someone even put up signs on the Turnpike warning us that the end was coming last March. Once again we survived another end of the world.

But, does speculation about the future really prepare us for that future? According to Jesus it doesn’t.

In fact Jesus tells us in this passage as he has told so many times before that speculation about the future is futile. We don’t know the day or the hour. (Matthew 25:13)

So speculation is not a good way to prepare for the kingdom that comes. In fact, it is a waste of time.

### PREPARATION BY COMPASSION

Instead, the Bible tells us that we should prepare for the kingdom that comes with simple, daily acts of kindness. When we lift up those that are broken by life we connect with the Spirit of the Savior, and we prepare for the kingdom that comes

Do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats? Jesus said that when all is said and done God would separate the faithful from the unfaithful.

And what will the criteria be? How will God separate the sheep from the goats?

It's simple. The sheep are the ones who show compassion toward those that have needs, those that are hungry and thirsty, those that are beaten down by life in some way. And the goats are those who ignore the needs of the helpless.

Jesus said that when the final judgment comes this will be the criteria for the judgment. The compassionate sheep enter eternal glory. The selfish goats will be judged eternally.

It will all be a surprise. Those who were sheep didn't know that they were serving Christ when they served those broken by life. And those who were goats didn't know that they were ignoring Christ when they ignored those broken by life.

Notice this. They're not judged by their theology. They're judged by their actions, by their compassion or lack thereof. Once again it's not about talking the talk. It's about walking the walk. (Matthew 25:31-46)

The Bible also tells us that we're saved by grace through faith and not by works. (Ephesians 2:8-9) But, the Bible also tells us that faith without works is dead. (James 2:26)

Grace produces people who are gracious in their actions. Faith produces a people who are faithful in the way they behave.

As we've noticed these past few weeks this didn't happen with many religious leaders in Jesus' day. They talked the talk, but they didn't walk the walk. And Jesus is letting them know that the time is short. Their lack of compassion will be their undoing.

Unfortunately, they didn't listen. Instead of hearing the warning and making compassion for the poor and downtrodden the cornerstone of their life, they crucified the Son of God. Instead of heeding the warning about the kingdom that comes they continued down the path that led to destruction.

## A RELATIONSHIP

Jim Wallis, the editor of the Christian magazine, *Sojourners* talks about how most people see the poor in our society. He wrote that most people see the poor in two ways, on television or in statistics.

He said that seeing the poor in this way might make us concerned that the problem is so large, but it will never make us compassionate.

Compassion only comes through a relationship. Compassion only comes when we take the risky step of getting to know the person in need.

But we often want to look the other way when it comes to the poor. We want to cut the poor out of our lives. We want to act as if they don't exist.

Wallis went on to tell a story about a member of his group, a young overly enthusiastic seminary student, who decided to cut every reference to the poor out of a Bible as a way to demonstrate how many references there are to the poor in the Bible. It took him a very long time!

And Wallis said that when he got through with that project, the word “Holy” Bible had a whole new meaning for him!

Not only was this Bible full of holes, it was in shreds.

Wallis used to take this Bible with him when he preached, hold it in the air and say, "Brothers and sister, this is the Bible for many of us, full of holes from all we have cut out."

Insofar as we leave the poor and those in need out of our Bibles and out of our lives we have a faith that will fall apart. We will never know Jesus.

Wallis would conclude his sermon with a story about a woman who had a Bible and a life that was not full of holes. She ran the Sojourners community center, just one and a half miles from the White House.

Three hundred families would be standing in line to receive a bag of groceries just to get them through the week.

But, before the doors were opened, Mary Glover, a sixty-year-old black woman would lead the volunteers in prayer. She prayed,

"We thank you for another day to serve you, Lord. Lord, we know that you'll be coming through this line today so, Lord, help us to treat you well."

Today's passage is a stern warning for the church. Jesus is telling us to quit speculating about the kingdom that comes and start preparing for the kingdom that comes.

## THE PREPARED MIND

Preparation is the key. Each day we should spend some time reading God's word and doing God's will. Each day we should think about the eternal implications of everyday choices.

I had a chemistry teacher who used to say, "Chance favors the prepared mind." In other words many people might see something that is scientifically significant. But, only the one trained as a scientist is prepared to understand the significance of the event.

In the same way those who daily pursue spiritual things will be prepared to understand the spiritual significance of the things that happen in life. And ultimately this will prepare us to receive the kingdom of God when it comes.

If we live with one eye on the kingdom that comes, it will help us put our lives in the proper perspective. Our priorities will be different if we live for the kingdom that comes and seek to have God's will done here on earth.

In our lesson for today the bridesmaids prepared for a wedding, a party. And I think that in the final analysis that is what we prepare for as well.

We prepare for a party to end all parties, what the book of Revelation describes as the wedding feast of the Lamb. At this great party people will come from the East and the West and the North and the South just to sit at God's table.

When I counsel with people about their weddings I try to impress upon them that they don't have to spend a lot of money to have a meaningful wedding. In fact some of the best weddings I have performed have been very simple yet very meaningful because it was obvious that the bride and groom had prepared ahead of time.

They prepared by thinking about their vows and working on establishing a lasting relationship. And that made all the difference.

In a wedding it is the relationship that is most important. Everything else, the rings, the clothes, the cake, the decorations, the reception are all secondary. All of those things are just ways to symbolize what is at the center of a wedding, the love and commitment of a man and a woman.

I think that there is a parallel between preparing for a wedding and preparing for the kingdom of God. The most important thing is the relationship.

What did Jesus tell us just a few weeks ago? Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. And love our neighbor as ourselves. Our relationship with God is inseparably entwined with our human relationships.

And so each day is an opportunity to gather oil for our lamps in preparation for the kingdom that comes.

AMEN.