

JESUS IS COMING! ARE YOU PREPARED?

If there's one thing in life we really hate to have happen to us, it's being caught totally unprepared, especially for something important. I'm sure that's happened to all of you at one time or another. I know it's happened to me. I've been caught by pop quizzes in classes. Maybe you've been caught unprepared to make a speech or presentation. Most pastors share a common nightmare about being caught unprepared for a sermon on Sunday morning. I've woken up many a Saturday night from a nightmare that I was unprepared for Sunday's sermon. I'm sure all public speakers share a similar nightmare. Being unprepared for anything, especially something important, is down right terrifying! We don't like to be unprepared. In the parable which we read this morning, Jesus told a parable about the biggest event we will ever face -- Jesus' second coming when he comes to judge the living and the dead. The parable tells us Jesus is coming! Are you prepared?

To help us understand the urgent nature of always being prepared, Jesus tells a story about a wedding banquet. Now for this parable to make much sense to us, we need to understand Jewish marriage customs. In those days, first, the couple would take mutual pledges of faithfulness. With these promises, the couple was considered legally married. Remember how Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary? And when he thought she had become pregnant by another man, he was going to divorce her? The divorce would have been necessary even though they had never been together or lived together as husband and wife. They had publically pledged themselves to each other.

So here Jesus tells of a couple pledged to each other. However, the couple was not yet living together as husband and wife. At a set time, the wedding celebration would take place. In the evening, the bridegroom would go to house of the bride, accompanied by several of his friends. The friends of the bride, who were waiting at the house, would then escort the bride and groom to the groom's house, where the celebration would begin.

Now the part that Jesus was talking about was where the bridesmaids were waiting at the bride's house for the groom to arrive. So in the parable, here are these 10 bridesmaids waiting for the groom to come sometime that evening. They have their lamps with them to light the way. Now of course they didn't have batteries or electricity back then, so these lamps were vessels which held oil with wicks sticking out. The oil would gradually burn off as the wick burned.

Now we're told there was a difference among these women. These women looked the same. They were all bridesmaids, they all had lamps, they were all intending to head to the celebration, but there was one major difference. Five of them were foolish enough not to bring extra fuel, just in case the groom didn't show up right away. They weren't properly prepared for this most special of event. The other five were prepared. They brought along extra containers of oil for the lamps.

Now what point was Jesus making with this parable? Jesus was teaching that we should be continually prepared because we don't know when the bridegroom Jesus will return. The 10 bridesmaids would represent those who await Jesus coming. In other words, those who profess to be Christians. The lamps seem to represent the light of faith in Jesus, which the properly

prepared person will have when Jesus returns.

Just as those bridesmaids looked the same, so also, those who profess to be Christians also look somewhat the same. Yet every person who professes to be a Christian, won't be in heaven. Simply having your name on the membership list of a church isn't enough. Like the five foolish bridesmaids, they will look like Christians on the outside, but on the inside, they won't be prepared. It's no secret that there are hypocrites in the church. People who say the right things and show up in church, but inwardly they don't trust in Jesus as their Savior. They're like rotten eggs. They look good on the outside, but they're rotten inside.

Others as time goes by are misguided. Maybe they had faith in Christ, but as time goes on they begin to drift from the faith. They become lax in hearing the Word and in receiving the Lord's Supper. They may say that they're praying, and that they believe in God, but in reality they wander away from Christ only to find themselves unprepared when Jesus returns.

But let's not talk about some Christians and others. Jesus is talking to you... and to me. He wants us to be prepared for his return. Are you prepared? How do we know if our faith is still strong or if it's dying out? Are you fully fueled or running on fumes? God tells us how we can know. God says that not any fuel will work for a true faith. Now I've known people who had a strong faith, but they were using the wrong fuel. I knew a man who said he firmly believed he would be in heaven because he faithfully tried to lead a good life. He had faith, but it wasn't in the right place. Such a person won't be at the wedding celebration because his fuel source is wrong. It's like trying to burn water in an oil lamp. It doesn't matter how much water you have, you're not going to make that lamp burn. God tells us that Jesus and his Word is the only fuel for our lamp of faith.

You know with the fitness craze that's been sweeping the country, many people are particularly conscious of what they put into their bodies. If only we were equally concerned with the fuel we feed our soul! My friends, Jesus and Jesus alone is the bread of life for our souls. Jesus himself said, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."... Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.... For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." Yes, Jesus is the bread of life. By nature we were spiritually dead. There wasn't even a flicker of spiritual life in us. We, by nature have no fuel for eternal life. But Jesus has given us life. He suffered and died on that cross for our sins. He paid the full penalty for our sins and rebellion. Through faith in him we have life again. Through Jesus we are completely prepared for heaven. We only await the bridegroom's return.

But when you get right down to it, what good is fuel when you run out of it? Those 5 foolish virgins would have told you it wasn't any good if you ran out. It's important for us to keep replenishing that fuel supply. In America today, there really is no need to pre-plan your fuel stops when driving somewhere is there? There are only two times in my life I can think of times I pre-planned fuel stops. Once was when I drive the Alaska Highway from Oklahoma to Anchorage, Alaska. It took 6 days at 12 hours driving per day to make that trip. The Alcan Hwy in the middle of northern Canada is not the place you want to risk running out of gas, especially

if you're driving it in the winter. The other trip which had a planned gas stop was when we lived in Russia. It was a 5 hr drive from our home in Iskitim to our preaching station in Tomsk. There was one major gas station in the long stretch between cities. You had to know in advance it was there and plan to stop. You don't want to risk being stranded.

Our trust in Christ is kept strong and fully fueled by continuing to study God's Word and receive the Lord's Supper. We dare not run out of fuel and be left stranded short of heaven. What happens to a reservoir in a drought? Obviously, the supply of water running into it dries up, and then the reservoir does also. Friends, if you cut yourself off from God by choosing not to hear and study the Word, and by not going to communion, you are cutting yourself off from God's grace which is keeping your faith alive and growing. God's promise of full and free forgiveness in Christ is beautiful news to us. But it's the last thing Satan wants us to believe. When that promise isn't continually renewed in your mind and heart, and when you cut yourself off from the means God has established to give you his grace, you risk losing your trust in Christ as your faith dries up.

Think of the means of grace as the pipeline which is bringing God's grace to you. Remove that pipe, and suddenly you find yourself with out God's grace. Let me tell you a sure way to cut off your supply of grace. Stop hearing the Word. Keep your Bibles closed. Don't listen to and meditate on God's eternal truths. Stop attending the Lord's Supper. Avoid that sacrament in which we partake of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Do those things and you will cut off your supply of grace.

Make planned fuel stops... and Sunday to Sunday isn't going to cut it. You need daily fuel stops to feed your faith and grow in your relationship with God.

My friends, if you're not 100% sure right now that you will go to heaven, may I suggest it is because you're faith isn't being fed as often as it needs? Jesus is coming and we don't know when. Jesus is coming and we don't know when. We won't expect it. Jesus could return in 5 years or in 5 minutes. For that matter, your life could end in five years or in 5 minutes. Are you prepared? If not the time to prepare is now. Not next year, not next week, but now.

God has given us a certain amount of time on this earth to come to faith in Christ. When our time on earth is gone, so is our chance to make it to heaven. Look at the parable again. The 5 virgins who were prepared entered into the house for the wedding celebration. They went in and the door was closed behind them. They celebrated, they enjoyed the company of all the guests, they enjoyed the kindness and generosity of the bridegroom. The 5 who weren't prepared were locked out. In fact, the bridegroom even denied knowing them. They weren't allowed to take part in any of the celebration. Once Jesus returns, judgment will be immediate and it will be final. There is no second chance. The believers will be with Jesus for all eternity in heaven, celebrating their companionship with God. The unbelievers will spend eternity in hell, locked out from God's presence.

The parable also makes sure we understand that preparation is an individual thing. Note how the foolish virgins tried to borrow some of the wise one's oil. They couldn't do it. Jesus makes it clear that you won't be able to borrow someone else's faith. Just because your parents believed, doesn't make you a believer. Just because your spouse believes and will be saved, doesn't mean you will be saved. Just because your church teaches the truth of God's Word doesn't automatically make you a believer in that truth. Jesus cautions and encourages us to make sure we are prepared when he returns. We shouldn't count on our outward connection with Christ or

his church, but rather Jesus will look at the living faith we have inside us fueled by the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Friends, Jesus is coming. Are you prepared? If you're not sure, let's take a short three question quiz to find out. Answer yes or no in your own mind. (1) Do you believe that Jesus, who was true God and true man, lived a perfect life on earth and never once fell into sin, and that that perfect obedience is yours? (2) Do you believe he suffered and died on the cross for your sins, paying their full debt? (3) Do you believe he rose from the dead, proving he had paid for all your sins, and assuring you of your resurrection? If you answered yes to these three questions, the Holy Spirit has worked faith in your heart and I can tell you beyond any doubt that you are prepared. Don't let Satan snuff out that fire that is burning? Keep refueling that faith through the Gospel by first of all continuing to hear and learn and study God's Word, and secondly by receiving the Lord's Supper regularly. In God's grace, you will be ready when Jesus returns! Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understand will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.