

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear friends in Christ,

We are nearing the end of a church year. The church year does not follow the calendar year. Two weeks from today will be the beginning of the church year with the season of Advent. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. The end of the church year is also the season in which we appropriately also remember the times. Our lives on this earth are not forever. This sinful world is not forever. Things will come to an end, and Jesus calls us to be ready.

That is the beauty of following a set church year the way we do. Every single year we need to be reminded to be watchful as the end draws near. And if it ever crossed your mind that it seems a little bit repetitive, understand that Jesus himself repeated these things many times.

Jesus repeated it many times because it's extremely easy for us to miss this point, or dismiss this point, or forget this point, or become distracted from this point. You see, when things go along in a similar way for a long time, we unconsciously tend to apply Newton's first law to it. An object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. When we get into a routine and things go on day after day as they have been, we forget that there are unbalanced forces out there that can and do change our current inertia.

Financial planners will tell you to be prepared for contingencies. Be prepared for emergency expenses. It's not a matter if they will come, but when they will come. Be prepared for retirement. Your current job and income will not continue forever. Be prepared to be laid off our out of worker. Be prepared to for a disability. Any of these unbalanced forces could change your current inertia, so be ready.

Similarly, Jesus, our spiritual planner, tells us to be ready and prepared. The difference is, the financial planner is preparing you for things that may or may not happen. Jesus, our spiritual planner, wants you to be prepared for something that absolutely will happen one day. Jesus will return. We will face our maker one day and we will give an account before him. The day of Jesus return will come unexpectedly, but it will come. Are you ready? Are you keeping watch? This is our focus today.

So let's take seriously this warning from Jesus today found in Matthew 25:1-13. The verses we are about to look at come in the middle of an extended discourse about End Times. If I could give you a homework assignment, I'd like you to go home today and ready Matthew chapters 24 and 25. Let's listen to the entire parable, and then we can talk about it.

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, 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. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said.

‘Open the door for us!’ ‘But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ ‘Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

The two chapters about the end times in which this parable is found are all in response to a single sentence Jesus spoke. His disciples pointed out how beautiful the temple was, and Jesus said that not one stone would be left on another. He foretold the destruction of the temple which would happen with the fall of Jerusalem in 70ad. But that triggered a longer discourse. The disciples ask: **“When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”**

In answer to this question: “When” Jesus says four times prior to this parable that the moment of his return is coming and it will be unexpected. The moment of Jesus’ return is unknown to us. You are aware that throughout history, people have tried to predict the end. They’ve all been wrong. Jesus is clear. When it does come, it will be unexpected. But it is coming!

To clarify the point, Jesus tells the parable we just heard. Jesus frequently used parables because he was a master teacher. The best way to teach someone something they don’t know is to start with what they do know, and use that to explain the unknown. The unknown that Jesus was always trying to explain was the Kingdom of Heaven... the Kingdom of God... the way things truly work in the eternal, spiritual realm.

In this particular case, Jesus is teaching something about the end of all things, something about his return. Now what makes this parable a little challenging is that what was known to the disciples about their culture’s wedding practice is not known to use today. Not only do we need to be familiar with these customs to understand this parable, but these comparison’s are found throughout the New Testament. I counted well over a dozen references and comparisons to the wedding customs in the New Testament, and we will fail to receive the instruction and comfort of God without this knowledge. So let me take a moment so that we can know what everyone in Jesus’ day already knew.

In those days, most marriages were prearranged by the parents... sometimes from childhood. When the two came of age and were old enough to marry, there was a betrothal ceremony. It was almost like a contract in which the groom’s parents paid a price for the bride and the couple promised lifelong faithfulness to the other. It was considered a legally binding agreement that could not be broken. Once that betrothal took place, there was a period of preparation before the actual marriage took place. The groom would prepare a home for his bride. Sometimes it was an addition to his parents’ house. Sometimes it was their own separate dwelling. When all things were prepared, the groom would go to the bride’s house, usually at night. The exact time of his arrival was unknown, so the bride and her bridesmaids would be ready and watchful for his arrival.

When he arrived there would a joyful and loud procession usually to the house of the father of the groom for the wedding ceremony and celebration... a celebration that lasted a full 7 days. It was the biggest social event of the time.

With this backdrop, we can better understand the parable. Of this whole wedding process I just described, this parable is concerned only with one small part of it. The bridesmaids are waiting for the arrival of the groom.

A quick note about interpreting the parables of Jesus. In his parables, Jesus is making a single point. In other words, there is only one point of comparison, and we have to be careful about making comparison’s beyond what Jesus intended. Also, we have to be careful about over

interpreting every detail of a parable. If Jesus doesn't clearly make a connection for us about what something means, we should not do so either.

So, in this parable, we are at that point where the groom has made all preparations for his bride. The night has come when **he will come** for her to take her to the wedding banquet. Waiting for his arrival are 10 bridesmaids... the text calls them virgins... who are waiting for the arrival of the groom. Where is the **bride**? Who is the bride? It's not important. It has nothing to do with the point Jesus is making. Who is the **groom**? Here we can say it's Jesus, because Jesus is explaining the suddenness of his coming. What does the **wedding banquet** represent? Well, it must be eternal glory – heaven – after Jesus' return. Jesus is explaining that some will be "in" and some will be "out."

Now the key question: who are the **10 virgins**? The context shows us that this is not a reference to people of the world in general. These are people who claim a connection to the bride and groom. These are people who expect to be in the heavenly banquet, celebrating. The 10 virgins represent all who profess to be followers of Jesus. The 10 virgins are you and me and all who call themselves Christians as we wait for Jesus return. But the 10 are not identical. Some are wise and some are foolish. These bridesmaids have an important job to do: Light the way for the wedding party to the wedding celebration. The wise ones have extra oil. The foolish ones have only the oil in their lamps. When the bridegroom comes, they do not have oil for their lamps. While they are away buying oil, the wedding procession proceeds to the location of the banquet. The doors are closed for good. When they arrive, they hear the horrible words, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you."

What do the **lamps** and the **oil** represent? The lamp is faith, and the oil is the means of grace which fuel faith. Faith is your connection to Christ. If you have no connection to Christ, then you must face God based on your own merits and performance. No one can stand before him and live, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So Christ, our strong bridegroom, comes. We, his followers are his bride, and our sins have made us homely and unattractive. More than that, our sins have made us completely unsuitable for our bridegroom. So our bridegroom decided to make us lovely. He took what was repulsive – our sin – and made it his own. He forgave it and sent it away forever by enduring the ugly punishment we deserved. Jesus clothes us in the robe of his righteousness and declares us lovely, suitable, ready, attractive to him. His resurrection proves it, and guarantees it.

Faith is your connection to Jesus, so that all he accomplished becomes yours personally. And the way the fire of faith is ignited and continues to burn is through the means of grace. The means of grace are those means through which God delivers his saving grace into your hearts... grace which creates and strengthens faith. Those means of grace are God's Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper. God's Word affirms that you are forgiven through Jesus. Baptism affirms that you are washed of your sin, born again, and connected to Christ. The Lord's Supper affirms that Christ's body given and blood shed is for you and your forgiveness.

Friends, take the warning of Jesus seriously. At this point it might be easy to sit back and think, "Great message pastor! But you're preaching to the choir. We're here. We already believe. We're feeding our faith. Clearly we are the 5 prepared virgins, right?" Not so fast. When Jesus spoke this parable, it was not to the masses. It was not to a large crowd of people. It was to his *disciples*. The warning of Jesus in this parable about being unprepared is for everyone here today... not just those who aren't in church very often. Of those who were watching and waiting for the bridegroom, half were unprepared!

The question Jesus wants you personally to wrestle with is this: are *you personally* prepared for Jesus' return? If you are prepared now, will you be prepared next month? Next year? 10 years from now? Scripture contains numerous warnings about drifting from God and losing faith. People drift away when life becomes busy, or hard. People drift away when other things become more important than their relationship with God. People drift away when they don't make God's Word and Sacrament the highest priorities. What are you doing to keep your faith well fueled? Is the flame burning low?

It's never an intentional thing. It happens by inattentiveness. It happens when you fail to watch. You never meant to stop going to church. You just missed a Sunday. Then a second. Then a 10th. You didn't plan ahead of time to skip the Sunday morning Bible class. But you were busy, and you didn't go that once. And it was kind of nice to have an extra hour in your morning, and the pattern began. You didn't plan to stop daily Bible reading, meditation and prayer. You just got busy. Life happened, and it went by the wayside. You didn't plan to commit that sin, but when your defenses were down, you fell into it. Then again, then again. You didn't plan to hide your faith in Jesus at the office. But on the spur of the moment, you kept silent. And it was easy. And you've been silent since. You didn't plan to give such a small percentage of your income to the Lord, and instead pour it into selfish desires and empty treasures. It kind of happened. You didn't plan on abandoning Christian friendships and spending most of your time with unchurched people. They were just the ones you were doing life with at the time.

The 5 foolish virgins didn't plan on running out of oil. But neither did they make the intentional and well planned effort to have the fuel they needed.

Friends, all of these things can lead you to be unprepared when Jesus returns, or unprepared when your life on earth ends and it's time to meet your Maker. What I just mentioned are two categories: **Failure to feed our faith. Failure to live the faith.** Failure to feed your faith means you're starving it and causing it to die. Failure to live your faith means you're failing to exercise it, which causes it to atrophy and die.

There could be no more dreadful words than, **'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'** As our church year draws closer to the end, and as Jesus' return draws closer, can we recommit ourselves to fueling our faith. Imagine what priorities you will have to rearrange. Imagine what your schedule will have to look like. I challenge you to commit yourself to making whatever changes are needed to keep God and his Word number one in your heart and life so that you will continuously be ready.

Recommit yourself and your family to worship regularly, to attend our Sunday morning Bible class, to spend time in personal Bible reading, meditation and prayer as part of your daily routine. Today, put it on your calendar, then tell someone you trust your plan. Ask them to check in with you periodically to see if you're doing what you planned to do. Recommit yourself to living life with your fellow believers. How can you encourage one another if you're never together, or never in contact?

Friends, the days are perilous. The end is drawing closer. You can't afford to be foolish. God calls you to be wise. Now is the time to store up supplies of oil that fuel your faith. Will it be a long night yet, or a short night before we hear the midnight cry? From the limitless supply of God's grace, keep the lamp full to overflowing. Keep watch, because you don't know the day or the hour. Amen.