

**Nov. 9, 2014 – Matthew 25:1-13 (OT: Amos 5:18-24 Epistle: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)**

*Watch and be ready for the coming of the Son of Man.*

Are you ready for Jesus to return? Jesus tells us what that day will be like in our Gospel reading. He tells the story of ten women who go out to meet the bridegroom. The women fell into two groups: those who were wise and those who were foolish. The wise were able to join the bridegroom at marriage feast, but the foolish missed out and were not let in. If Jesus returned at this moment, which group would you be in?

When we initially hear or read this story, we may think that the difference between the wise and the foolish virgins is that the wise brought extra oil for their lamps and the foolish ones didn't. But that is not what Jesus says. The vessels in verse 4 may refer to the oil reservoir of the lamp that feeds the wick, not to an extra container of oil. But even if it was extra oil that the wise women brought, Jesus says in verse 3: "*Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them.*" Not only did they not bring any extra oil, they brought no oil whatsoever! Their lamps were empty! It's no wonder that they went out when the foolish virgins tried to light them – the wicks would flare up but there was no oil to keep them burning! To put this in modern terms, those who were foolish brought flashlights without any batteries in them. How foolish is that?!

What does the oil represent? That is a good question, but one that we really cannot answer. We can speculate and come up with a number of guesses, as people have done throughout the ages. But the truth is, Jesus does not tell us.

This illustrates an important point about understanding parables: we should be careful not to try to read some meaning into every detail. Often Jesus interprets the parable Himself, as He does here in verse 13. Usually there are one or two things in the story that bring out the point Jesus desires to make, with the other details simply supporting the story. We can miss what Jesus is trying to teach us when we seek to interpret details whose meaning Jesus does not explain and whose significance is not immediately clear.

In verse 1, Jesus says that "*the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.*" Jesus explains that He is this bridegroom in verse 13, as the lesson He draws from this story is to be ready for the coming of "*the Son of Man*" – to be ready for His coming. Jesus is also referred as the Bridegroom in a number of places in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:34-35, John 3:29, Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9).

Jesus tells us that this parable represents "*the kingdom of heaven*" so that the ten virgins refer to those who are part of this kingdom. They have all been invited to the marriage feast. They have all gone out to meet the bridegroom. We can see from this that all ten are part of the church who are eager to meet the bridegroom. But five were foolish and five were wise.

In the Bible, numbers can be symbolic, but I don't think that we can read any meaning into the numbers here in this story. Ten may simply be a round number. It goes beyond what Jesus says in this parable to infer that at the end of time half of those in the church will be excluded because Jesus divides the ten women into two groups of five. The focus is not on the number but on the fact that some were wise and some were foolish.

We could spend time discussing first-century Jewish marriage customs and try to figure out to whose house the bridegroom was coming, where the virgins were when they fell asleep, and oth-

er details that really only distract us from Jesus' main point. The bride, after all, isn't even mentioned once in this story.

The lesson for us to keep in mind is what Jesus says in verse 13: "*Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.*" This is the same point that Jesus made several times in the previous chapter. In Matthew 24:42 Jesus said, "*Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*" And before that in verse 36, He said, "*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.*" Jesus' words are unmistakable. We don't know when He will return. I'm not sure how He could have made that any more clear.

But still, so many want to know. So many try to predict when Jesus will return. The Jehovah's Witness have made several predictions, all of which turned out to be wrong. It became so embarrassing that they finally said that Jesus did in fact return the last time they said He would, but His return was an invisible one. Several years ago Harold Camping of Family Radio predicted that Jesus would return on May 21, 2011. His group put up billboards across the nation urging people to be ready. That date came and went without Jesus' return. Mr. Camping has since admitted that his attempt to predict a date was sinful, as Jesus Himself said we will not know the day or hour.

It is probably a good thing that we don't know exactly when Jesus will return. It would be easy for our sinful nature to say, "Do whatever you want. You have time to get right with God later." But Jesus tells us to watch and be ready. While His coming may seem delayed to us, we should not use that delay as an excuse to sin.

On the other hand, we may wish Jesus would return sooner rather than later. We would rather be done with all the difficulties and trials of this sinful world. But God tells us that His delay shows His patience toward us because He is "*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9). God "*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4). The Bridegroom delays His return so more can come to His marriage feast.

But "*at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'*" (v. 6). While Jesus return may seem delayed, it is certain! Our Bridegroom will come again, as we confess every Sunday in the creed. He will come to judge the living and the dead.

At this cry the virgins arose and got their lamps ready. The empty lamps of the foolish would not burn – their empty flashlights would not turn on. The wise did not have enough oil for both themselves and for the foolish ones who brought none, so they told them to go buy oil. This isn't necessarily a facetious suggestion. There may have been a market still open, or they might have been able to find and awaken the oil seller. We are not told if they were successful or not, only that when they later returned they found the door shut and they were not let in.

The wise and the foolish virgins probably looked the same to the outside observer, just as those who profess to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ look alike in many ways. But not all those who read the Bible or attend church will share in the blessings of the Bridegroom's return. While Jesus does not tell us that the oil represent something in particular, the lesson here is clear: one person doesn't have enough for another. You cannot not saved by someone else's faith in Jesus. Proverbs 9:12 says, "*If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it.*" We each stand or fall individually before our Lord and Master (see Romans 14:4).

Another thing we see here is that there is no "second chance". Once the Bridegroom shuts the door there is no entry. This truth is driven home by the fact that if this were just an normal,

earthly wedding feast the bridegroom would not refuse to let in some late guests. But the fact is that when Jesus returns it will be too late for those who are not ready. In Luke 13:24-25 Jesus said, “*Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open for us,’ and He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know you, where you are from.’*” Once the door is shut, no one will open it (see Revelation 3:7).

The same holds true at our death. Hebrews 9:27 tells us: “*it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.*” We are not reincarnated so that we can have another chance. We die once and face God’s judgment.

This is why God tell us: “*Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon*” (Isaiah 55:6-7).

The good news is that the Lord is near. He will abundantly pardon because of Jesus’ first coming. It is Jesus’ first coming that prepares us for His second. Jesus came to offer Himself once for all to take away the sins of the world. He came to pay for your sins and pardon your iniquities. Whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life. Jesus gave His life for you on the cross so that you are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb.

It is easy to focus on the foolish virgins in this story as their fate is so tragic. But there is good news in this story as well. Jesus also tells of those who were ready and “*went in with him to the wedding.*” After all, the reason the bridegroom is coming is to welcome people to the wedding feast.

Have you ever been to a sad wedding? Of course not! Weddings are joyous affairs! It is no accident that Jesus often likened His kingdom to such a marriage feast. In Jesus’ day the celebration often lasted several days, but imagine one never ends, one that lasts for all eternity!

Another part of the good news is that you don’t have to worry about what to wear! You don’t have to worry that your clothes are not clean enough or not good enough. Jesus lived a perfect life of complete obedience to the law and fulfilled God’s law for you. He gives you His righteousness as the perfect wedding garment (see Isaiah 61:10), so that you are ready for and welcome at His marriage feast.

In verse 12 the bridegroom would not open the door for the foolish virgins because he did not know them. “*The Lord knows those who are His*” (2 Timothy 2:19). “*He knows those who trust in Him*” (Nahum 1:7). And that is the key to being one of the wise: believe and trust in what Jesus has done to purchase you as His own. Believe and trust in His perfect life to fulfill the requirements of the law on your behalf. And believe and trust in His death and resurrection to pay for your sin and earn you a place at His marriage feast.

May God keep you in faith so that you always watch and are ready for Jesus’ return. Amen.

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