

Bridesmaids, Be Ready!

- I. Be ready, no matter when the groom arrives
- II. Be ready, with a full jar of oil

25 “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

⁶ “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

⁷ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

⁹ “‘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.’

¹⁰ “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.

¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

¹² “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

¹³ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

When I was in high school at Martin Luther Academy in New Ulm, Minnesota, the cheerleaders used to get the crowds fired up with a cheer that started, “Are you ready?” And we’d shout, reply, “Yeah!” “Are you really ready?” “Yeah!” “Then let’s go, fight, win tonight. Go, fight, win tonight!” Now whether you had that same cheer back in the day, or not, the fact is, that opening question, “Are you ready? Are you really ready?” applies to something more important than getting ready to cheer on the local high school team. It also applies to the fact that every one of us is going to one day, what shall I say? We are going to “Meet our Maker.” The question is, “Are you ready? Really ready?”

Today we turn our attention to a parable that Jesus once told his followers to prepare them for that Day. It’s been called the Parable of the 10 Virgins. Today we might call them the 10 bridesmaids, because that’s what they were: young women who were waiting to accompany the bride and groom into the wedding banquet. This morning/evening we want to put ourselves in the sandals of those bridesmaid and listen as Jesus gives us this simple advice:

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I expect that you've maybe heard it said that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Or to put it another way, it's a description of something that might occur in everyday life which in turn has a parallel in the spiritual realm. So, let's start by understanding what's happening in the earthly part of the parable. Jesus begins this parable with the words, "At that time," (in other words on the Last Day, be it the last day of our life or the Last Day of this world)— *"At that time, the kingdom of heaven will be like 10 virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise."*

Now maybe a little explanation of Jewish marriage customs is in order. Back in Jesus' day marriages were often arranged by the parents. The marriage began with a ceremony in which the man and woman publicly pledged themselves to each other. From that moment, they were regarded as legally married, even though they were not yet living together. Instead, the groom would take some time, maybe even a few months, to prepare a home for his bride. And when everything was ready, he would come to the bride's house, more likely his in-law's house, and then bring his bride to their new home, where the real wedding celebration would be held, including a banquet that might last for days. Well, it's that moment—when the groom came for his bride—that the bridesmaids were waiting for, because they all wanted to accompany the bride and groom into the wedding banquet.

But here's the thing. The bridesmaids never knew exactly when the groom was going to show up. I mean, if grooms back then or anything like rooms today, you know how it goes. The guy kind of loses track of time, he gets distracted by some last-minute project or he's hanging out with his buddies, maybe having a little bachelor party, and the next thing you know the clock is striking midnight. Well, that's what happened in Jesus' parable. The bridesmaids were all waiting for the groom to arrive and when he didn't show up. Or as Jesus puts it here in our text, *"The bridegroom was a long time in coming."* So, what did the bridesmaids do? Jesus tells us, *"They all became drowsy and fell asleep."*

Tell me, is there a spiritual truth that corresponds to this part of the parable? When people who wonder whether their day of Reckoning with God is ever coming, what are they tempted to do? They're tempted to fall asleep, spiritually speaking. You know the attitude. "I don't need to worry about my spiritual life now. That can wait till I'm older. I don't need to think about where my soul is going when I die. I've got more important things to do. I've got better ways to spend my time. I don't have to worry about, you know, "Judgment Day." Or as the scoffers once said in

2nd Peter 3, *“Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”* To which Jesus would reply in the words of Matthew 24, *“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”*

That's the first lesson that Jesus wants to teach us in this parable. Just because he hasn't come yet, doesn't mean he's not coming. Or put it a little more personally, just because you and I are alive today, doesn't guarantee that we'll still be alive tomorrow. And the same thing is true for our children and our grandchildren. This week, I was reminded of that fact in a pretty dramatic way. On Thursday I had a zoom call with all the WELS missionaries in Asia. And at the beginning of the meeting, one of the missionaries informed us that that morning his 10-year-old grandson had tragically died while playing in his backyard. Talk about hitting us all like a ton of bricks. My friends, that's why Jesus says, *“So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. (Matthew 24:44).*

But now, let's understand that there's a difference between expecting that something will happen, and actually being ready for it when it does. Isn't that right? I mean there are a lot of people who are expecting that they will die someday. But are they ready for that we'll happen at that moment? Are they truly prepared for what the Bible says in Hebrews 9:27, *People are destined to die once and after that to face judgment?* Too often, the answer is “No, they are not really ready.”

I mean, wasn't that the case with the bridesmaids in the parable? Remember, they were all expecting the bridegroom to come at some point. They were all waiting for him to arrive. But, when the cry rang out, “The bridegroom is here,” only half of them were really ready to accompany him. And why was that? Well, as it turns out, back in Jesus' day, the groom would often arrive after dark. And because there were no streetlights back then, the bridesmaids had to provide their own lights for this procession from the bride's house to the groom's house. And because they could never be certain when the groom was going to arrive or exactly how long the wedding procession would take, the bridesmaids needed to bring extra oil with them, to keep those lights burning and to keep them from being left in the dark.

And really, this is the turning point of this parable. It's what distinguishes the wise bridesmaids from the foolish ones. How did Jesus put it? *"The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps."* ⁶ *"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"* ⁷ *"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The 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."* ¹⁰ *"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."*

Now I want you to notice two things about those bridesmaids. Number one, at the beginning of the parable they all look pretty much the same. They all had lamps. They were all waiting for the groom to arrive. They all wanted to accompany him into the wedding banquet. But notice (and this is point number 2), at the critical moment when the groom arrived, it turns out that some of them were unprepared. They didn't have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. So in the end, they were shut out of the wedding banquet.

So, what are the corresponding spiritual truths for this part of the parable? First of all, when it comes to people who are expecting that someday they're going to meet their Maker, people who are maybe even looking forward to seeing Jesus someday, people who want to go to a better place when they die, outwardly, those people look pretty much the same. They live relatively good lives. They maybe go to church. They give their offerings. They enroll their kids in Sunday school or Christian Day School. They're all people who profess to be Christians. Just like the bridesmaids, they're all expecting the bridegroom to come and welcome them into the heavenly banquet. In fact, maybe you and I would put ourselves in that group.

But at the critical moment, when we all will stand before God on his throne, there will always be a reckoning. A dividing between those who are wise and those who are foolish. A dividing between those whose lamps are still burning brightly, and those whose lamps have gone out. And how can you know which of those two groups you will be in? Well, let me put it this way. If God were to ask you, "Why should I let you into my kingdom?", what would you say? If your answer begins with the words "Because I..." "Because I did this for you, God" or "Because I did my best to not do that." If on your final day, your hope for life with God rests on something you did, then tragically, your lamp has gone out. And you will be shut out of the

kingdom forever.

But if your answer begins not with the words “Because I” but rather with the words “Because he...” “Because he loved me enough to die for me. Because he found me when I was lost. Because he has forgiven me for my most unthinkable sins...” My friends, if in Christ alone your hope is found, then you can be sure that the flame of saving faith that God once lit in your heart is still burning brightly. Jesus’ words are sure, *“He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* (John 11: 25-26) That’s the promise that God has made to you.

And what's the fuel that keeps the God-given faith in your heart burning? What's the jar of oil that keeps your lamp lit? Simply put, it’s the Gospel, the good news of God's love for you in Christ Jesus. Whether that gospel comes to you in the form of God’s Word here in the Bible, or through Jesus’ body and blood, or through the washing with water and the word, you can be sure that these are the tools, these are the instruments that God uses to create and sustain saving faith in your heart. What does Scripture say? *Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ.* (Romans 10:17)

So, what’s the point? The point is this: if you want to be ready, really ready to meet your bridegroom, with a faith on fire, then don't let your jar of oil go dry. Keep your jar of oil filled, whether it's through a worship service like this, or whether it's gathering around God's word in a life group or Bible study or in your own personal devotional life. You might say that when it comes to maintaining our Christian faith, we have to be proactive. We need to be thinking ahead. Kind of like those wise bridesmaids who made sure that they had the oil they needed to keep their lamps lit.

Or to put it another way, it reminds me of something that happened to me about a month ago. I decided I was going to take the boat out for one last fishing trip. Going to catch some crappies on the Wolf River. So I'm checking out my equipment. I've got my fishing poles, my tackle box, the landing net. I even stopped to buy some lively minnows. I'm thinking, “I am good to go.” So, I get out on the water and drop in the electric trolling motor and the propeller goes “Whiiiiirruummp.” And I'm thinking, “No! Don't tell me the battery's dead! Why didn't I charge it ahead of time? I even have a trickle charger. I just never plugged it in!”

My friends, that’s what it means to be a foolish bridesmaid. Whether we’re talking about not charging our battery or not filling our lamps with the oil of the gospel, the fact is, being wise

means being proactive. It means letting God fill you up with his truth, his love, his grace, to prepare you for whatever is coming in your life, whenever it comes.

Do you remember that 10-year-old who suddenly died in his backyard? 2 months earlier, his mom asked his grandpa, missionary Steve Witte, to read some Bible passages to him. And so for the remainder of that man's furlough, he shared Bible stories with his grandson, three times a week. They talked about Jesus. They talked about heaven. And about how someday they both see Jesus there. Little did either of them know that at that moment, God was preparing both of them for what was to come, sooner than either of them expected. Through his Word, God was making sure that both of them were ready, I mean, really ready. And through his Word, God is making sure that the same thing is true for you. In Jesus' name. Amen.