

**Matthew 25:1-13 (NIV)**

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

*<sup>6</sup> "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"*

*<sup>7</sup> "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'"*

*<sup>9</sup> "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.'*

*<sup>10</sup> "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.*

*<sup>11</sup> "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'"*

*<sup>12</sup> "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'*

*<sup>13</sup> "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*

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Turn with me back to the book of Matthew, would you? Matthew, Chapter 25.

These past weeks, we've looked at passages that speak specifically of the Church, the true followers of Jesus, as Jesus' bride. We've even gone so far as to call the Church "Jesus' wife," which probably sounds a little odd to you, as it does to me. I don't know why "bride" sounds more orthodox.

But you know, Revelation 21, verse 9, clearly calls the Church "Jesus' wife," so we're on solid ground with our wording there.

Still, as several scholars have pointed out through the years, this husband/wife metaphor that the Bible give us deserves much more attention than it has received, because it speaks so richly of the intimacy of what Jesus wants in His relationship with His people – in His relationship with us!

Not only would our doctrine of the Church be far richer if we'd pay more attention to this, our understanding of the marriage relationship would be richer as well.

We spoke a couple weeks ago about Jesus' intention and purpose to make us – we who follow Him – pure and holy and all God originally created us to be – truly worthy of a husband like Jesus.

God knows we're broken people, but He has tremendous plans and hopes for every one of us, individually, and for all of us, together. God really does want us to be all that we can be, and we need to understand that if we are really ever to live in the

richness of relationship with Him that Jesus died to make possible.

We talked about that two weeks ago.

Then last week, we looked at *agape* – the sort of self-giving love that Jesus has for us that He wants us all to have for Him and for each other, and especially for earthly husbands to have for their earthly wives. Jesus is the model of "husband" that the men of the early Church so desperately needed – and that Christian men still need today. He's the model of how to love a wife as a husband should.

Ephesians, Chapter 5, gave us those details.

Now, today's text there in Matthew 25: while it is Jesus speaking Himself, he is speaking more indirectly about His bride.

Through the years, some who have studied this text have understood it to be *pure allegory*: a story in which every element stands for some greater thing or truth, and which leads to *all sorts* of implications and suppositions.

Others have claimed that what Jesus says here is *pure parable*: a story that comes together to communicate just *one*, larger concept or truth.

I tend to agree with a *third* group, who see this as an *allegorical parable*, sort of a combination of the two where one central truth is being communicated, but through the symbolism of several of the story elements.

So, the first thing to determine is, what are the symbols and what do they mean?

Well, some are easy.

The wedding banquet is the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus tells us right up front, "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like...*"

The coming groom, for whom all are waiting, is Jesus.

The strange arrival time – midnight – reminds us that the Messiah will return at a time that is completely unexpected. Jesus tells us that plainly in Matthew 24 – that His return will be like that of a thief in the night.<sup>1</sup>

And the "*Lord, Lord!*" cry of the bridesmaids, as well as the groom's sad response: those sound almost exactly like Jesus' words in Matthew 7, where He tells those who thought they knew Him, but had not, in fact, lived a life of doing God's will, that they would not be admitted to His Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 24:36-44

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7: 22-23

It takes more than just a verbal confession – or a mere mental acknowledgement of Jesus – to truly be part of His Church.

Also, I think the main point of the parable is fairly easy to figure out. Jesus spells it out Himself there in verse 13. He says that His followers – those who would be part of His world, His bride, His Kingdom – must *“Keep watch for His arrival, because we don’t know when He’ll come.”*

But there’s more here than just that, isn’t there?

Of those who are waiting – of those who are part of the bridal party, why are some called wise and others foolish?

Based on the point of the parable, some might say, “Well, the wise ones were *watching* for the groom’s arrival, and the foolish ones were not.”

But that’s not really the case.

The fact is, *none* of them were *watching*, as we likely think of it. All of them were *sleeping* when the announcement came.

So, it’s not like the foolish ones were snoozing and the wise ones were up and busy and looking out the windows.

That tells me that *watching* has to refer to more than just literally those who are awake and aware and actively watching and waiting. There has to be more to a “wise watcher” than that.

And that leaves the *oil*, and specifically the extra jar of oil that those whom Jesus calls wise had with them.

It seems that the one thing that allows some of the wedding party to be admitted to the celebration is the fact that they had brought this extra jar of oil with them, along with whatever was already in their lamps. Those are the ones Jesus calls wise.

The foolish ones brought nothing extra.

And so, the clue to wise “watchers,” I think, is found in verse 10 there, where we’re told that *“The ones, the maidens, who were ready went in with him.”*

Those who were *ready*.

Ready for what? Ready for the groom to arrive? No, they were all ready – they were all excited and eager and waiting for him to come.

I think the wise bridesmaids were said to be wise, not because they were ready *for the groom*, but, as Thomas Long writes, because they were ready *for the groom’s delay*.

To bring along extra oil is the signal that they were ready for the groom to come either early or late. If the groom had come earlier – if He had come when people presumed He would, then all of them would have cheerfully greeted Him and been admitted to the banquet.

But you see, our assessment of what is and what isn’t on time in life, and specifically about “when He was supposed to come,” is not always correct, is it?

Our conception of “right” time – *Kairos* time – is not always the same as God’s.

It took the early church a while to understand this about Jesus’ return.

It’s pretty clear that most, if not all, of the apostles thought that when Jesus said He would be returning, He meant that He would be returning within days – or maybe weeks.

But He didn’t, you see?

And here we are, two thousand years later, and He still hasn’t.

Now, we have His Spirit, yes. Jesus promised His Spirit would come and He has. But as yet, Jesus, Himself and His Kingdom that He promised would come in full is still only partly here. He will bring much more with Him when He returns.

And so, the “wise” of His body – the true bride – understands this and is prepared, not just for His *arrival*, but for *His choice* of its *timing*.

The wise bride is both *prepared* and *patient*.

Those that make it all the way to the banquet are those who hold onto faith *deep into the night*, you see.

Those who make it all the way to the banquet are those who, even though it’s dark and it’s late and although trying as they might see no happy thing – no groom approaching, still they serve and hope and pray and trust in His timing, and they wait for His coming.

Though anxious and disappointed, they stay faithful – and they wait.

Their faith in Him, despite circumstance, allows them to wait.

Which is what faith is and what faith does, right?

Because faith that sees is no faith at all, Paul says in Romans 8.<sup>3</sup>

As the writer of Hebrews says, *“Faith – is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”*<sup>4</sup>

That’s consistent in all of Scripture – from Abraham on. True faith is prepared to wait, and that sets apart the true bride of Christ.

Some don’t have it. Some, if they don’t get what they want when they want it, won’t hang in. They will turn away in discouragement and conclude that their groom has left them at the altar, and they’ll give up on the wedding and the banquet and all the good that the groom has promised.

Some will get sick of waiting and after a time, they’ll say, “Phooey!” (or maybe a word stronger than that) and throw in the towel and walk away.

They are not willing – they’re not *prepared* to wait.

And after they’ve walked away – when they are far away from Jesus – that’s when, in the middle of history’s long night, when it’s least expected, the cry will come, “Look! The long-expected Bridegroom is here at last! Come out to meet Him!”

But they will be too far away to hear the call, and tragically they will miss the party – they’ll miss the Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:24

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 11:1

All who are truly of the bride, though, will wait in faith.

They are ready – because they are ready to wait.

They are willing to let God set the time of the coming of, not just the Bridegroom, but of everything else of life.

So, are you ready today?

Are you ready: are you willing to let God set the timing, not just of Jesus' return, but of anything and everything about your life?

You see, it's a decision we all must come to individually: that we will wait in faith on Him, on His timing, on His wisdom, on His purposes.

And, as this parable shows us, the decision to be willing and prepared to wait is a decision we can't necessarily make at the last minute and still be guaranteed a place in the banquet.

We have to make this decision while we have opportunity.

Because, you see, the faith involved in that decision is something that we can't borrow from our friends at the last minute.

Just like the bridesmaids not being able to borrow the oil from the others: there wouldn't have been enough, and then everyone would have been in the dark.

We can't live patient and prepared lives on the faith of others. It does no good to say to Jesus, "My

father followed you; my mother lived for you; my neighbor walked with you; my best friend waited for you."

No, we have to have the faith to wait in ourselves. Just as the wise bridesmaids said, we have to, "buy that oil for ourselves."

That's why decisions made today for Jesus are so important. Tomorrow may not give us opportunity.

We need no money to buy a faith that will wait on Him. But it does cost us. It costs us our sin: we have to give that to Jesus. And, it costs us our plans and agendas and imaginations about the timing of our lives.

It costs us nothing, and it costs us everything that is not of Christ within us.

Are you ready to "buy" the faith to wait – to let God set the timing of your life, your plans, your future?

So that you might see the Kingdom when it comes?

You can make today the day of salvation. You can give yourself to Jesus right here, even at this table – and You will never be sorry.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Take My Life and Let It Be*

Benediction