

The One About Stocking Up For the Party

Have you ever had a nightmare about being unprepared? Apparently, it is one of the most common types of dreams. When I was in law school I often dreamed I was unprepared for the one and only test that determined my grade for the semester. I dreamed that I had shown up for the test and forgotten to study. **Now** I dream I am unprepared for the Sunday church service. I've dreamed more than once that I was working furiously in the office to get ready and the church members just got tired of waiting and left. It's terrifying to have that kind of dream. I remember the panic that I felt as I hurriedly tried to get ready for something I should have been ready for long ago. And it feels like you are part of a hopeless and failing effort. How you had this dream about being totally unprepared?

Well, today's parable of the bridesmaids, includes some of the final teachings of Jesus – some of his last words. So, although they are hard words to hear, they must be extremely important.

Today's scripture falls within the part of Matthew known as the final discourse. These are some of the final words of Jesus – they are some of the last words he speaks before he dies. We certainly give special credence to the things that people do or say as they prepare to die, because a dying person wants to give some special words of love or wisdom – something important – to the people around him before dying.

And this final discourse is also known as the judgment discourse for reasons you may already noticed in the scripture – the reason being that five of these bridesmaids are ready and five are not. And for the five who were unprepared things don't work out so well because the groom refused to open the door and replies to them, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you." And honestly, there must be nothing scarier to hear at the end of our lives. There must be no greater panic than to face the realization that the end is near, and we aren't prepared.

This whole story of the bridesmaids with the lamps has always seemed a little strange to me. It seems like some kind of crazy made up story through my western eyes. But what I learned is that this story really could have happened at any time in a Palestinian village – apparently even in modern times.

The first thing to know is that a wedding was a great occasion. In that place and time, the whole village turned out to go with the couple to their new home, and they went by the longest possible route in order to receive the good wishes of as many people as people. There is a Jewish saying that says "from six to sixty" will

follow the wedding party. And Rabbis agreed that a man might even abandon his study of the law to share the joy of a wedding feast.

The point of the story lies in a Jewish custom that is very different from our own. When a couple married, they did not go away for a honeymoon; they stayed at home. And for a week they kept open house. They were treated as royalty and even addressed as prince and princess. It was the happiest week in all their lives. Their chosen friends were admitted to the festivities – not only for the marriage ceremony itself but for the joyous week after, too.

And it this over the top, extravagant, and joyful week of festivities that the foolish bridesmaids missed out on because they were unprepared.

And to explain the parable further, I found a story written by Dr. J. Alexander Findlay who was telling about what happened to him on his modern-day visit in Palestine. He wrote this: “when we were approaching the gates of a Galilean town, I caught a sight of ten bridesmaids beautifully clothed and playing some kind of musical instrument, as they danced along the road in front of our car; when I asked what they were doing, they told me that they were going to keep the bride company till her bridegroom arrived. I asked him if there was any chance of seeing the wedding, but he shook his head, saying in effect: ‘It might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a week’s time. Nobody ever knows for certain.’ Then he went on to explain that one of the great things to do, if you could, at a middle-class wedding in Palestine was to catch the bridal party napping. The bridegroom might come unexpectedly, and sometimes [even] in the middle of the night. So the bridal party has to be ready to go out into the street at any time to meet him, whenever he chooses to come. Other important points are that no one is allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp, and also that, when the bridegroom has once arrived, and the door has been shut, latecomers to the ceremony are not admitted.” And soit is with these details that we see that this parable is not some kind of invented situation, but a slice of life from a village in Jesus’ place and time. So this parable would have had immediate local meaning and connect with the listeners. But it has a wider and universal meaning for us, too.

This parable contains many allegorical elements; there are hidden meanings in each of the parts of the story. Scholars generally agree that the bridesmaids are the church waiting for the second coming of Christ. The bridegroom is Christ. The wedding feast is the great and joyous occasion in which Christ comes for his church. The delay of the bridegroom corresponds with the delay that Matthew’s church had experienced. The bridegroom’s arrival in the dark of night is the second coming itself. The closing door is the final judgment.

The immediate significance was directed to the Jewish people to whom Matthew wrote. They were God’s chosen people, and their whole history should

have been about preparing for the coming Son of God – for the Messiah that they expectantly awaited. They ought to have been prepared when he came. Instead they were unprepared, and un-accepting, and so they were shut out.

This parable also addresses the second coming of Christ to the people of Matthew's church. During the first century church, Christians expected that Jesus would have already come by then, and so Matthew addresses this unexpected delay in Jesus's return.

But there is one item in the parable whose meaning is debated by scholars – and that is the oil. And this is really the main question for us. What is the oil? How **do** we prepare for the coming of Christ? How do we prepare not only for the second coming of Christ, but how do we prepare for our own deaths? We **will** face one or the other. There's no getting around that. And we have no idea the day or the hour of either one, do we?

Martin Luther said that the oil is faith. Others have identified the oil as piety, good works or a personal relationship with God. If you look at the context of this parable – if we look at the other parables surrounding this one, it can help us figure it out. So listen to this.

In the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servant – the faithful slave is the one found at work when the master returns. And so in that parable, being prepared--having enough oil – means working faithfully for the Lord.

In the parable of the talents where one servant uses what he is given and the other hides it, being prepared-or having oil – means using the gifts God gives in the service of God.

In Matthew 25, the Son of Man rewards those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit the prisoner. And so in that scripture, being prepared - or having oil – means generosity to those in need.

And so maybe in the wider context, having oil – being prepared – means obeying Jesus's teachings – all of his teachings. The idea is not only that salvation is a one time event – that we are “saved” by our baptism or our profession of faith, but that we also continue being saved everyday through God's grace. A good beginning is not necessarily a race well run. Instead, if we are one of those people who are lucky enough to find God **before** our moment of death, we have the great blessing of choosing how to live. Maybe to have enough oil in our lamps we need to prepare every day. Maybe to have enough oil for our lamps, we need to grow closer to Christ every day. Maybe we need to act more like Christ every day. Maybe we can't cram for the test at the last minute.

Instead, we have to prepare. In my nightmares, my subconscious was reminding me that it takes time and effort to learn all the things I needed to know

for a law school exam. It takes time and effort to prepare for a worship service every week. And it is intentional and focused preparation that is needed.

In the same way, it takes time to prepare ourselves to meet God. It takes time to develop that relationship and to come to know God in a personal way. When Mary of Orange was dying, her chaplain tried to tell her about the way of salvation. Her answer was: "I have not left this matter to this hour." And so neither should we leave our relationship with God to the last hour – if we do, it just might not happen.

So too, there are some things which cannot be borrowed. Just as the bridesmaids found it impossible to borrow oil, so we cannot borrow a relationship with God. It's something we experience ourselves, in our own way.

I think this parable calls us to be prepared for Jesus to come again. I think it calls us to prepare for our own death if that comes first. But I think we are also called to prepare for life – to live our lives according to the teachings of Jesus, so that when we see Jesus we will have nothing to fear – because we **will** be prepared – we will have lived in such a way that all can see Jesus in us --the light of Christ will shine in us!

To me, in the parable of the bridesmaids, Jesus makes it clear that he has expectations of us --- there are standards that we must take seriously – we are commanded to love God and love people – we are called to put God first in our lives.

Today is the last sermon in our series about the stories of Jesus. I hope you will know that Jesus did not spend time telling these stories to entertain people or to be clever. I hope you know that Jesus had a very **specific earth-shaking, radical message** that he wanted to get across to every single person he came in contact with. That message was one about change --- he called people to change their hearts and to change their lives -- he urged them to turn away from their lives of sin and separation from God and to turn toward God. He called them to draw near to this God who loved them with an everlasting love. And in today's parable we learn that there is a deadline, and we better be ready.

Jesus makes it clear that there is a time to come to Christ, and there is a time when it will be too late.

When the bridegroom is standing at the door it will be too late to start preparing. At the end of our days, we can't borrow a relationship with Christ from someone else, either.

It will be too late to pray and to read scripture – too late to be baptized, too late to grow closer to God, too late to love one another and too late to forgive those who have wounded us.

When the door closes, it is too late.

J. Ellsworth Kalas writes that “there wasn’t a reason in the world why the bridesmaids missed the party, except that they didn’t take advantage of the opportunity that was surely theirs.” (Kalas, p. 107). There is no reason for us to wait, either.

If we live our lives preparing to meet Jesus, if we grow more like Christ every day and if we grow closer to Christ every day – what blessings we will behold! What joy! -----And I’m not here to tell you just about a reward that you will receive one day – when we all get to heaven! I’m saying that experiencing God’s presence right here and right now is an immediate reward – we can experience a slice of God’s kingdom right here on earth.

So, what are you waiting for?

What a shame it would be to miss out on all the over the top, extravagant and joy filled festivities that God has in store for us in heaven and in this very place, today.