

Awaiting the Bridegroom

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 10, 2021.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour (Matt. 25:1–13).¹

Stories are powerful. Engaging the imagination, they enable us to see reality through a world the author creates. We are entertained, and through stories with intent we are informed or taught far more convincingly than with bare facts.

Consider the power of Jesus' stories, in the form of parables. Through parables, Jesus conveys truths that were not as obvious except through a story. They are more than earthly stories with heavenly meanings but, as Theon put it, they are fictitious sayings "picturing truth" (Snodgrass, 8). They open our eyes to truth and encourage us to walk in it.

Think about it. If you wanted to teach someone about loving other people unconditionally, what story could you tell? How about the Good Samaritan? In that parable, we are taught the power of selfless love for the least and the destitute, helping us to better see God's love for us in Christ and how we must love likewise.

What if you wanted to explain God's grace shown to sinners like you and me, what story could you tell? How about the Prodigal Son? How can a father love such a disrespectful and ungrateful wretch of a son? And yet the father runs to him, forgives him, and welcomes him home, showing to us God's love for even a wretch like me.

Or, what if you wanted to convey to someone the certainty and imminence of Christ's return and the necessity of being ready for it. How about a parable about ten bridesmaids who await the bridegroom's processional to a marriage feast?

The "Parable of the Ten Virgins," as it has been titled, is the story of ten unmarried bridesmaids who are awaiting a bridal procession. The setting is in the dark of night, the characters are few, but our curiosity is piqued immediately. Why are these young maidens waiting? Why are lamps, or torches, necessary? What is the processional and where is it going?

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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Scholars tell us that according to ancient marriage customs during the time between the betrothal and marriage, the woman would remain in her father's home awaiting her wedding day.² When the day arrived, the bride would be escorted by an entourage to the groom's home, typically at nightfall. As the bride's processional proceeded from her home, so the groom would go out to meet her. Upon meeting, the two processions would become one as they proceeded to the groom's home, where the party would begin, sometimes lasting up to seven days.

Assuming this is the context of the story, now consider the situation. There are ten bridesmaids, which Jesus equally divides and labels: a foolish five and a wise five. Why are five foolish? They took their lamps but no extra oil to burn. Why are five wise? They took their lamps and flasks of oil in reserve. So, we may deduce that foolish means unprepared, while wise means prepared. But why would preparation be so important?

Here begins the dilemma in our story: The groom is running late. It's getting late, it's dark, and these young women are sleepy. In fact, they all fall asleep. Of course, light doesn't matter while you sleep, only when you are awake, but they do not stay asleep. They are awoken by a midnight cry: "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him."

Likely startled, they all prepare to relight their lamps. Why is this a problem for five out of the ten? The foolish five have no more oil; the wise five have just enough. Off run the foolish five to buy oil, and while they are away the groom's processional arrives. The wise five join in and proceed to the marriage feast, while the foolish five are late to the party.

If the parable ended here, we might deduce that the moral of the story is to be prepared with extra supplies when traveling, or less pragmatic to be prepared for the unexpected. But the parable turns dark when we learn that the foolish five are not merely late to the party. They are locked out. And they are not only locked out but disregarded as unknown. The groom, who is now addressed as "Lord," says to the five, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." They are alone and unknown. There is no happy ending for the foolish.

This unexpected turn in the story also serves as its conclusion, but we are told something more with Jesus' concluding commentary: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." What are we to make of this parable and its unexpected ending? How are we to interpret it in light of Jesus' commentary? What does Jesus mean by "watch," and what are we to watch for? To address these questions and more, let's start by considering those who are wisely waiting.

Wisely Waiting

To understand the wisdom of the five bridesmaids, we must understand what Jesus means by "wise." All ten bridesmaids had lamps and awaited the groom. All ten anticipated his coming but grew sleepy. All ten slept. All ten were awakened by the announcement of his coming. But only five were ready. So, wisdom in this parable is not anticipation or wakefulness but preparation.

² Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 510.

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Consider their wisdom in contrast to the foolish bridesmaids. The foolish five sleep without readiness for the bridegroom's arrival. When they hear the cry, they scurry off to acquire oil for their lamps, evidencing their lack of preparation. And when the bridegroom arrives, their last-minute endeavors prove to be too late.

As the conclusion of the parable reveals, there are drastic consequences to not being ready for the groom's arrival, which is in keeping with what Jesus says in the preceding passage, "you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matt. 24:44). Like the bridegroom of the parable, Jesus is coming for his bride. Like the bridesmaids, we anticipate his return, even if it seems as if he is delayed. Some will be ready for his coming, trusting in Christ as their Lord and Savior, living out their faith in anticipation of the marriage feast to come. Others will live like the foolish, putting off Christ and his offer of salvation.

Sadly, for some, it will not be until the midnight cry, announcing our Lord's arrival, that they will think to prepare themselves. But upon Christ's coming, upon the bridegroom's arrival, the time of repentance and faith will have passed, judgment awaits. Locked out of eternal life and unknown by our Lord, they will suffer in outer darkness.

Are you wisely waiting on the Lord? Have you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior? Or is it something that you plan to deal with later? Will the Lord return and find you ready by faith, awaiting his arrival, or will he find you ill-prepared, scrambling for preparations, yet without faith in him? Are you wakefully watching?

Wakefully Watching

In the preceding passages in Matthew, Jesus directs us to "stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matt. 24:42). Interestingly, in this following parable, Jesus tells of ten bridesmaids who all fall asleep waiting on the bridegroom. The wise and the foolish all sleep alike. Clearly, there is more to Christian wakefulness than loss of sleep.

Are then the wise five bridesmaids wakefully watching for the bridegroom as they slumber? In short, yes. They are in fact ready for his arrival. As one commentator explains, "the wise disciple can sleep secure in the knowledge that everything is ready."³ The wise bridesmaids are ready and when they hear the cry, they are indeed wakefully watching.

I am reminded of the words of the psalmist who sings, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep" (Ps. 127:1-2). Our Lord does not call us to be spiritual insomniacs, as if our final salvation is conditioned upon an incessant wakefulness. Rather, he calls us to awaken to our need for a Savior, to keep watch over our walk with him, to find ourselves ready for his arrival, and to rest in his provision as his beloved. Conversely, the five foolish bridesmaids had no business sleeping. What they needed most was lost to the pleasure of deep sleep, and when they awoke it was too late.

³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 947.

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Are you sleeping without a saving knowledge of Christ? Awake to the reality that you are spiritually unprepared without him. For if he returns tonight while you sleep, apart from saving faith in him, you will never rest another moment in your life. But all who trust savingly on the Lord Jesus Christ will be willingly welcomed into eternal rest.

Willingly Welcoming

The bridegroom did finally arrive. He found five bridesmaids ready, and he welcomed them to the marriage feast. We know nothing of these individual bridesmaids, only their number and wisdom. What we do know is that the bridegroom's coming was anticipated, they entered into the party, and behind them the door was shut.

In keeping with the opposite of the Lord's words to the foolish, he *knows* these bridesmaids. They are welcomed because they are part of the wedding party. Likewise, the Lord knows all whom he has chosen and given the gift of faith. As Paul reminded Timothy, "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim. 2:19). Indeed, by God's grace through faith in Christ, we "have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" (Gal. 4:9).

The five foolish bridesmaids were not welcomed into the marriage feast. They were not known by the Lord. Does the Lord know you? If not, the door will be shut on you to the heavenly feast forever. You may one day be ready, but it will be too late. But if you, by God's grace, put your faith in Jesus Christ, the door to the kingdom of heaven is open, and you will be welcomed by the bridegroom himself. In fact, you are known today and forever.

Stories are indeed powerful, as we see in this simple parable. But more powerful than a parable is the reality of Christ's presence within all who believe. By his Spirit, he enables us to wisely wait for his return. Through his preserving presence, he sustains us to wakefully watch for his coming. For, it is by the guarantee of his Spirit in all who believe that he willingly welcomes us into his kingdom forever.