

We are headed down the home stretch of 2020—mercifully. The first Sunday of Advent is a mere three weeks away on November 29th. Reading the parables of Jesus from Matthew 25 this month, we turn our attention to the end of time. The topic of the Second Coming of Christ anticipates Christ’s return in final victory, at which time each of us will be called to stand before the great white throne to account for our deeds.

This is what John foresaw in the book of Revelation: *“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books”* (Revelation 20:11-12). You know what we say in the creed: *He shall come to judge the quick and the dead*. That’s what we Christians believe. With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at the gospel of Matthew and the Parable of the Ten Virgins, including the activities leading up to a typical Jewish wedding in Jesus’ day.

Chapter 25 contains 3 parables of the kingdom of heaven, the first of which is our focus today. In his *Daily Bible Study Series*, William Barclay says that Palestinian weddings were occasions for great festivity. Everyone turned out. There was a lot of pageantry and tradition. The celebration went on for days. Among the rituals was a quaint little game played by the bridegroom on the bride. On the day of the wedding, she would wait for the bridegroom at a designated place, usually at the home of her parents. She would be accompanied by a host of maidens. Just before the bridegroom arrived, a herald (as in Hark the “Herald” Angels Sing) would walk down the street calling out, “Behold, the bridegroom is coming!” When the bridesmaids heard the announcement, they would rush out to greet the bridegroom, then the bride would appear and join her husband-to-be and they would process to where the wedding was to take place.

The suspenseful part of this was no one knew precisely when the bridegroom would arrive. And that was the point. He might come early in the morning or sometime during the day, or he might get there in the middle of the night. The [trick] was to catch the bridal party off-guard.

Since the bridesmaids had no idea when the bridegroom would come, they had to be ready, on a moment’s notice, to do their part. To further complicate matters, no one was allowed on the streets after dark without a lamp. Finally, once the bride and groom had entered the

hall where the wedding was to take place, the door was bolted. Latecomers were not allowed. (Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, *Daily Bible Study Series*, pp. 319-321)

This sets the stage for the drama of the parable. When the herald came down the street announcing the arrival of the bridegroom, the bridesmaids were understandably asleep. It was midnight, for heaven's sake. They rose quickly and lit their lamps and rushed out to greet the bridegroom. The wise virgins had the forethought to plan. They brought an extra flask of oil to refill their lamps, as needed. The foolish virgins didn't. They had no reserve. So, when their lamps began to flicker, they had to leave their posts and go look for more. When they got back, the wedding had started, and they were left out in the cold.

It's this extra reserve of oil I'd like for us to think about this morning. It raises the question: What can we do, day by day, to prepare for the unexpected? Have any of you noticed anything unexpected this year? (Silly question!) What can we do to be ready, on a moment's notice, to handle a crisis? What can we do to prepare ourselves for the tough times when our faith is put to the test?

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. That is the first point. If life is anything it's unpredictable. Just when you think you've got everything under control and you can kick back and take it easy, something unexpected happens—a pandemic occurs, and life is thrown into a tailspin.

Take 9-11, for example. Remember that awful day? We were into the ninth month of a new Presidency. Things were going well. Our country was at peace, relatively speaking. Do you remember where were you on the morning of September 11, 2001? If you were anywhere near a TV, you were stunned to see black smoke billowing from near the top of the World Trade Center. Then we all gasped as, before our very eyes, a second plane hit the south tower. Reports started coming in of a crash at the Pentagon and another plane fell from the sky in Somerset County, PA.

Just like that, our nation was under attack. We held our breaths and wondered what more bad news might be in the offing. Thankfully, that was it. Yet, the fallout continues to this day. We are still fighting in Afghanistan. We are subjected to more and more screening and security checks. The term, "homeland security," has become a fixture in our vocabulary. Expect the unexpected. Tragedy strikes like a thief in the night. That's the first point, and the second is: **BE PREPARED.**

The sad truth is, when the moment of crisis comes, it's too late to start preparing. We see this in the parable: When their oil ran out, the foolish ones rushed over to the others and begged for some of their oil. They said, "*The 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.'*"

On the surface, that sounds so cruel. Why wouldn't the wise ones share their oil with the others? The answer lies in the metaphoric nature of the parable. Oil here is a symbol for a life of faith and a healthy relationship with God. And, as we all know, a life of faith and a healthy relationship with God take time and effort and discipline. If you don't have it when the moment comes, it's too late, at least for the crisis at hand.

Methodist bishop Will Willimon wrote that when he was a young pastor in rural Georgia, a dear uncle of one of his congregation's members died suddenly, and he and his wife decided to attend the funeral. So Willimon and his wife drove to a back-woods Baptist church for the funeral one sunny afternoon. It was, Willimon says, unlike anything he had ever seen. They wheeled the casket in and soon thereafter the pastor began to preach. With great fire and flaying his arms all over the place, this preacher thundered, "It's too late for Joe! He might have wanted to do this or that in his life, but it's too late for him now! He's dead. It's all over. He might have wanted to straighten out his life, but he can't now. It's finished!"

As Willimon sat there, he thought to himself, "Well, this certainly can't bring any comfort to this grieving family!" The minister continued: "But it ain't too late for you! People drop dead every day, so why wait?! Too late for Joe but not for you! Make your life count, wake up and come to Jesus now!" Willimon concluded, "It was the worst thing I ever heard." "Can you imagine a preacher doing that to a bereft family?" he asked his wife in the car on the way home. "I've never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate! I would never preach a sermon like that." His wife agreed: it was tacky, calloused, manipulative. "And of course," his wife added, "the worst part is that everything he said was true."

Musicians rehearse and practice their individual parts for hours on end preparing for a concert. It's demanding work, and it takes a lot of strength and stamina. They rehearse for weeks. If they waited until the day of the concert, they would fall on their faces. So they prepare. The same is true in academics. When I was a student, I tried studying for an exam

90 minutes before the scheduled exam. It's called cramming! That never worked out so well. Likewise, developing strong faith takes time. And it takes effort.

You may be inspired by the faith of others, but that can never substitute for a faith of your own. It's up to you to cultivate your own relationship with God. A seminary professor of mine used to put it this way: "God has many children, but no grandchildren." In other words, when it comes to applying our faith to every crisis of life, it's up to us to stand on our own two feet.

So, when the lamps began to flicker, the foolish ones cried, "*Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.*" That is, we have no faith of our own to draw from, and in the moment of their despair, the wise ones answered truthfully: There is no way we can help you now. Expect the unexpected. I know what you're thinking: We could have used this sermon back in March!

Be prepared. When we fail to prepare, we are preparing to fail. That's what this parable is all about. The question is, how? What can we do to develop a life of faith and a healthy relationship with God now, when we have the time? 1) LEARN TO PRAY. Have a talk with God—anytime, anywhere, about anything. And 2) LEARN THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S WORD IN THE SCRIPTURES. Next to prayer, I don't know of a greater resource than to be able to recall passages from the Bible on a moment's notice. For example: "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul*" (Psalms 23:1-2). Every time my soul needs restored; those verses speak to me.

There are lots of ways to cultivate a life of faith and develop a healthy relationship with God, but I cannot think of anything better than expecting the unexpected and being prepared. Reading the parables of Jesus from Matthew 25 this month, we turn our attention to the end of time. The topic of the Second Coming of Christ anticipates Christ's return in final victory, at which time each of us will be called to stand before the great white throne to account for our deeds. What then are we to do in anticipation of that day?

I urge you to pray without ceasing and learn the message of God's Word. Do this and your lamp of faith will burn brightly even in the darkest hour.

Have you checked your oil lately? Amen.

(Thanks to Philip McLarty for sermon help)