

Parables of Ten Maidens • Matthew 25:1-13

There were some strange events surrounding both the birth and the death of Jesus Christ. When he was born an extraordinary star shone so brightly that astrologers from the east followed it all the way to Bethlehem. They had never seen anything like it before, and they never saw anything like it again. In addition, angels appeared to ordinary shepherds outside the city of Bethlehem and made their amazing announcement.

When Jesus was dying on the cross the sky turned dark at noon, there was an earthquake, rocks split apart, tombs opened and long-dead bodies came back to life and walked the streets of Jerusalem. People were stunned and scared. Even a hardened Roman soldier who thought he had seen it all was filled with awe and said, *“This truly was the Son of God.”*

Three days later Jesus himself came back to life. And forty days after that he ascended back to heaven, promising that he would come again. It’s been a long time since Jesus promised to return so we’ve got to be getting close to the return of Jesus Christ to earth. In a way that will be at least as stunning and scary as the Bethlehem Star and the Jerusalem Earthquake. Look with me at the description in Matthew 24:36-42:

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 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. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

Try to understand what Jesus is here saying. There is a day coming when he will return. When he returns he will sensationally rapture those then living to meet him. Some will be left and some will be taken—right out of the field; from the mill; two will be studying in the library (one taken/one left); two sleeping in the same bed (one taken/one left). It will be sensational—and sobering! The TV reports will be mind-boggling. It will be as historic as the miraculous events surrounding Jesus’ first visit to earth.

The trouble is, nobody knows when all this will happen. It could be anytime—maybe even today. So, Jesus wanted to warn everybody to be sure and be ready, just in case. In order to communicate this important message, Jesus told a parable set against the background of Palestinian marriages.

First-century Palestinian marriage customs were much different from American customs today. For example, the marriage transaction was divided into three parts. The first part was the engagement. This was the formal announcement made by the fathers of the bride and groom. It may well have been an arranged marriage where the fathers decided and the couple had no say. The couple may not even have met!

The betrothal was next with a formal ceremony in the home of the bride’s parents. It was a public event. Mutual promises were made before witnesses and the groom gave presents to the bride. This ceremony bound them together although they did not yet live together. If something went wrong in their relationship during that time period they couldn’t just call it off as we might call off an engagement. Instead it was necessary to go through the legal proceedings of a divorce. If the husband died after the betrothal his “wife” was considered

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a widow.

The actual marriage came about a year later. The groom would come to the home of the bride's parents, bringing his friends along with him. The time was always a surprise. In fact, it was often at an unusual hour in the hope of finding the bride and her friends sleeping, although the custom required that someone shout in the street that the groom was coming so that there would be a little advance notice.

The groom and his friends would escort the bride and her friends back to the groom's house where there would be a marriage feast. This was usually behind closed doors and only with invited guests. Finally, instead of a private honeymoon as in our culture, there was a week of festivities. The bride and groom were treated like royalty and were even called "prince" and "princess". Many considered this to be the happiest week in any person's life.

Now let's bring those two things together. Jesus wanted to warn about being prepared for his second coming. He spoke against the familiar backdrop of Palestinian marriage customs. His message is direct: BE PREPARED TO MEET THE LORD! His method for communicating that message is the parable of the ten maidens in Matthew 25:1-13. This parable covers the story in verses 1-12 and adds a moral to the story in verse 13.

The story begins with ten maidens taking their lamps and going to meet the bridegroom. Apparently they were friends of the bride and wanted to join in the festivities and the procession from the bride's parents' house to the groom's house. These processions were purposely as long as possible, attempting to go by everyone's house. It was a big deal!

The ten maidens figured that the groom might show up after dark because that was the "in thing to do". That's why they brought along their lamps. Actually, it was a legal requirement to carry a lamp when walking through the village after dark.

These customs may sound a bit bizarre to us, but think how our customs would sound to them. Imagine trying to explain that prior to a wedding the bride's friends give her a shower. A first-century Jew might ask, "Don't you usually take showers alone? Why would they give her a shower?"

And then there's a "stag party" for the groom. Why give a party for a stag? Wouldn't you invite people? Another one of our traditions is that there be something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. I have no idea where that comes from or what that's all about. Or throwing the bouquet, honking horns, tying shoes and cans to the couple's car—all of that is very hard to explain to someone from another culture or another time.

According to Jesus, fifty percent of the bride's friends were wise and fifty percent were foolish. The wise ones brought oil and the foolish ones brought no oil. Think of the foolishness of that. What possible good is a lamp without fuel oil? Imagine going out on a dark Minnesota night with a brand-new flashlight but no batteries. That would be foolish! Anyway, it's hard to figure out why they would bring lamps without oil. Maybe they planned to buy oil at the local Seven-Eleven but just never got around to it.

The groom in the parable took a long time to come. Maybe he had cold feet. Maybe he was having a super-good time at his house with his friends. Maybe he had other business to do. Maybe he was a tease. For whatever reason, he took a long time and the maidens fell asleep. The bridal shower turned into a slumber party.

There was another tradition, though. The groom couldn't just show up at the door; he at least had to be announced by someone who would walk through the street and announce that he was coming. So at midnight, while the maidens were sleeping, the shouting began: "*Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!*"

Have you ever been awakened unexpectedly from a sound sleep at midnight?

On our wedding day I needed to get something from Charleen. It may have been the marriage license; whatever it was it seemed important at the time. I went to her parents' house but she was asleep upstairs. I rang the bell. She slept through it. So I banged on the door until I thought I was going to break it down—and she kept sleeping. I threw stones against her bedroom window. She kept sleeping. I even went to a nearby gas station and phoned her, but she kept on sleeping. It's a good thing she wasn't in this parable! The whole story would have fallen apart.

The ten maidens and the bride had only minutes to comb their hair, fix their makeup and get their lamps ready before the groom would arrive and the procession back to his house would begin. Still a little groggy they trimmed their lamps. This included preparing and lighting the wick and getting the lamp ready to go. All ten of them did that.

Then a not-too-surprising-thing happened. The wise first five had lamps that stayed lit because they had oil. The foolish second five had their lamps quickly flicker and go out because the wick could not sustain a flame without fuel oil.

The five whose lamps went out very quickly turned to the other five and said, *“Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.”* The five with the oil didn’t want their lamps to go out too, so they said, *“No, there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.”* And with that the five wise maidens pushed the bride out the door and went singing and laughing through the streets.

This left a big problem for the five without oil. Remember that they were going to go out to the Seven Eleven? Except the groom came at midnight and the Seven Eleven was closed. There was no way for them to get oil at that hour. All the merchants were closed. Besides, they had no lamps to legally go out in the streets to get to the stores that sold oil. They were foolish indeed. They should have thought this through earlier. They should have been prepared!

Five maidens were included but five were excluded. We don’t know how long it took the foolish maidens to get oil. Perhaps they had to wait until after sunrise when the stores opened. Whenever it was, they were very late to the marriage feast. The door was locked. The feast was well under way.

The five foolish maidens knocked on the door. They pleaded to the groom, *“Sir! Open the door for us!”* But the groom was unsympathetic. He answered, *“I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.”* (Actually, he may not have known them. They were friends of the bride whom he may not have met before. Or, maybe he was just keeping them out because they were so rude in coming late.)

Live every day of life the way you think you ought to live your last day.

We have latecomers to weddings now, too. At rehearsals I tell the ushers the rules of etiquette. I explain that they are to offer their right arm to a woman whether she is alone or with a man and to the oldest woman if there are two or more women in a group. I also explain that no guests are to be seated after the bride’s mother. She is the last one seated. Latecomers must find their own seats in the back or sit in the foyer. It is considered rude to come late to a wedding.

Because of a few flasks of oil five made it in and five were kept out. But Jesus wasn’t just telling a cute wedding story. He wasn’t even telling a true story. He made it up. He was using it to tell a far greater truth. That’s why he added a moral to the story in Matthew 25:13: *“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”* Jesus was referring to his return to earth and he was telling them to be prepared. In the parable there were two powerful points about preparation: 1.) There are some things you can’t fix at the last minute; 2.) There are some things you can’t borrow.

Jesus is saying, *“Watch out! Be ready!”* When the time of Jesus’ return comes it will be too late. Preparation for that event must be in advance. You can’t do it at the last minute. When the time of his return comes there will be no borrowing of spiritual life. You’re on your own.

If Jesus returns today there are going to be a lot of unprepared people. Some will scramble at the last second to put their spiritual lives in order, but it will be too late. Others will try to make it on their parents’ godliness or their spouse’s spirituality, but it can’t be borrowed.

The answer is to be wise! Be prepared before the time comes. Accept Jesus Christ as your Savior

from sin now. Live every day of life the way you think you ought to live your last day. Be prepared whether Jesus returns today or you unexpectedly die three days from now or you live uneventfully for years to come. Be prepared!

Are you prepared? If Jesus returns in the next hour will you be taken or left? If you die tonight will you go to heaven or to hell? To not know—to

be unprepared—is foolish! It is downright stupid!

To be sure you have received Jesus Christ as Savior and are living righteously for him is wise. It is downright smart! Watch out! Be ready! Because you never know when! Jesus said that not even he knew! The angels don't know. Only God the Father knows when.

Like in the days of Noah when everyone was living normal lives with food and work and family and home . . . and then suddenly it happened, so it will be when Jesus returns. In fact, the end of our present lives will almost surely come as a surprise. Whether it's our own death or Christ's return, it is not predictable. The answer is to be ready because we never know when.

Jennifer Cody was not prepared for either Christ's return or death. I'm really not sure she gave much thought to either. At 16 years old many people think they will live forever and the prospect of Christ's return seems remote.

Jennifer Cody wasn't planning to go to camp that summer. In fact, she wasn't even signed up and the camp was already full. But there was a cancellation and some people from The Church on Mill in Phoenix where Jennifer and her parents attended put up the money for her to attend the six-day camp in Prescott, Arizona.

Gary Hardy, a youth coordinator, described Jennifer as a quiet girl who never expressed any interest in church activities although they had tried for a couple of years to get her involved.

Jennifer went to camp that July. She got involved right away. One night after talking with a youth sponsor she prayed to receive Christ as her personal Savior. At last she was ready!

Ready for what? Jennifer Cody was a passenger on Northwest Airlines Flight 255 that crashed in Detroit the following month—just five weeks after camp. That flight lifted off the runway from Detroit's Metropolitan Airport at 8:45 p.m. and crashed moments later in a fiery tragedy strewn across Interstate 94.

Jennifer was ready. She may be counted among the wise maidens!

Are you ready? The message of the parable could not be more important or more personal. BE PREPARED TO MEET THE LORD! Right now, receive Jesus Christ as your Savior. Right now, resolve to live a holy life with Jesus Christ as your Lord.

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