

Parables #10  
Sunday, August 14

The Wise and Foolish Maidens - Mt. 25:1-13

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A brief pastoral confession before we start: last week's teaching was the first time I had considered the two sons in the Orchard Parable as adults. Oh my goodness. What in the world have I been doing the last 30 years. In my defense, we had a favorite children's collection of Jesus' teachings and this is what I had firmly planted in my head:

So, the bottom line of the parable didn't change for me: true repentance is always better than religious lip-service. What did change was the stakes. Moving from "You know Dad, I'd really rather play with my toys right now" to "I don't respect anything about you and will not contribute to your livelihood and honor" is a whole different ballgame. And so the personal understanding of the No to Yes is a much bigger personal journey, as well.

I share that for two reasons: 1) as an encouragement for those of us who've been walking with Jesus for awhile, that while God's Word never contradicts itself with new understanding, there are new things to see in its never-changing truth, and 2) it's exactly why we do this every week.

As mentioned throughout our series, Parables generally propose one point. That point is meant to be provocative. It's a deep lesson that hangs on an unexpected turn for the listener, many of these teaching moments being curated for specific audiences. Most of the time these main points are obvious. Sometimes not. That usually led to Jesus hosting an after-party explanation for the disciples.

Because they propose deeper meaning, it's easy to find ourselves enamored with the details and what *they* might mean.

But, moving details to the forefront is a common mishandling of the text and teaching form. We've all been there: trying to understand the mystical meaning of a goat, the goat's hair, it's horn array. If you're looking for "types" - a stand-in, or representation for something or someone, Parables are not your landing place. Poetry, Wisdom Literature, Apocalyptic, Prophetic - yes. There's enough there to satisfy the most ardent Dallas Seminary grads and populate colorful timelines until, literally, Jesus returns.

Parables? Nope.

So, while it's fairly easy to "get" a Parable, the better question is:

Has the Parable “gotten” me?

The challenging turn of truth causes us to examine what we know about God and ourselves, especially as the latter is understood in terms of the former. These short tales are meant to establish, reinforce, and if necessary demolish our Kingdom concepts.

Jesus is taking great, and creative, pains to address our malformed ideas about God, life, faith, and eternity. Essentially, He’s saying: “I know you think... let me tell you a story to help you see more clearly.”

My mom had a phrase for this, when we siblings were a little too sure of ourselves. She could see our conclusions, based on 10-15 years of life experience, and then the way life more often works, based on her 35+, headed for a “rude awakening” (actually that was another of her phrases). When calling us to put the brakes on our airtight teenage worldview, she’d simply say “Well, (often adorned with a “Mr. SmartyPants”)... you’ve got another thing comin’.”

You’ve got another thing comin’.

Definitely sounds like Jesus in the Parables.

Here’s the great news. Sometimes the “other” thing was a warning - when we have not fully considered the logical and spiritual outcomes of our ways and thinking. But sometimes, it’s grace. Like in the story of the workers from a previous week’s teaching. The workers hired at the end of the day would have imagined they were getting partial wages.

No, you’ve got another thing comin’.

Are you walking in pride and self-assured righteousness? You’ve got another thing comin’.  
Buried under a load of guilt that you know keeps you at a distance from God and others, but willing to actually say that, and lay yourself at the feet of the gracious Judge?

You’ve got another thing comin’.

In every instance, the single point of a parable is a clarifying, smelling-salts kind of thing, landing as love from the One wanting us dearly to understand God, ourselves, and our world.

So, let’s see what “other thing” Jesus has comin’ for us today in the story of the Ten Maidens from Matthew 25:1-13.

Quick note from your Serve the Church Team. If you've downloaded the new app, you can get to fill-in sermon notes and the text by simply tapping through Sunday - Sermon Notes.

Let me read from Matthew 25.

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

*“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’*

*“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 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.’*

*“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.*

*“Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’*

*“But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’*

*“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”*

It’s a story a few steps removed from us by time and culture. But it would have spoken volumes immediately to any first-century near-eastern resident. Inserting our church’s missional call, it would have landed with the truth that:

Loving God in a life-defining way looks like constant, joyful attention to his presence and work in my life, especially as I long for the day of His glorious return.

Let’s pray.

Some quick notes on the passage itself. There is no parallel story in the other Gospels. That gives us a bit of a unique context which we’ll see in a moment, placing it roundly in the Israel-Messiah worldview and the Kingdom of God framework going along with it. Another parable in Mark ends with the same call: “Therefore, keep watch” but that’s the closest we get to another account of the same ideas. The verses following our text, Mt. 25:14-30 and then 31-46 are constructed as a whole. The first chunk as another story-picture, and then the remaining piece as Jesus’ movement from storytelling to explanation. So, I’d encourage you to continue reading through the end of the chapter sometime today or tomorrow to get the entire discourse.

But, let’s stick to 13 verses today.

1. “At that time...” -

Here we have an extra piece of context to the usual “The Kingdom of Heaven is like.” It’s a time/event-based framework for understanding the whole of the parable. It gives us a specific understanding of “how to live in light of this occurrence.”

What is it?

The Day of the Lord. The Actual physical return of Jesus to fulfill His earthly Kingship. The Messianic Thread of the OT establishes this reality. Jesus claimed it. Angels believed it. Apostles taught it. The church has affirmed it, overwhelmingly as an in-time and space reality (not just metaphor), for the majority of 2000 years. There are certainly variations on the specifics of timing and duration. But, the idea that Jesus' second coming is either somehow a manifestation of the church's influence (to bring His Kingdom) or an archetype, is a significantly minority view. In my opinion, to claim that approach you'll need to do some Olympic Gold Medal-worthy exegetical gymnastics.

Because Jesus Himself spends the 51 verses of Matthew 24, just prior to our text, unveiling the future a bit,

*"Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*

Wait, what?

*"... many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many."*

Hold on.

*"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains."*

*"At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other... "*

*"... this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

*"At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect."*

*"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory."*

Hang on. Why are they sad?

*"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father..."*

*“That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.”*

*“Therefore keep watch... ”*

Near the end of this discourse verse 27 astoundingly proclaims: “...as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Worldwide. Real. Obvious to everyone.

With both judgment and blessing in His wake.

Jesus is literally setting up this parable with “when I return in glory.”

So, “When I return in glory” the Kingdom of Heaven will be like...

## 2. Ten Maidens -

I know, the text most often gets translated as virgins. For the 12 year old boy in every adult male here I am trying to avoid the ongoing giggle factor.

These maidens were preparing to meet a bridegroom.

They all took their lamps and went out to meet him. Hang on. Why do they have lamps? Are there no lamps where they're going? Does everyone carry a lamp at all times after sunset or just maidens waiting on the verge of matrimony? Are all ten meeting a single groom? Is He choosing only one? Is he choosing none? I have some questions.

And an array of possible answers. Because ancient near-eastern marriage customs are not that well-understood. They also seem to vary from location to location. Here's what we do know:

They were long, often day(s) long.

They highlighted the bonding of two families in significant and elaborate manner.

It was often considered an act of communal devotion to God to be involved in the feast and rites.

Both parties had entourages, present and responsible for more than our common modern ceremonies.

So, it's far more likely these maidens are not a line of potential brides but the bride's party, her maids. There are processions and gatherings, some at the home of the bride, some at the home of the groom. There is likely some back and forth between the two homes. What we *do* get from Jesus' telling is that there is a point at which no more attendants will be allowed.

As far as imagery goes, commentators have been all over the map on this one. Five women = five senses, used either for good or evil. The sleep of the ten = death. The oil itself linked to all manner of spiritual realities.

None of these proposed hidden meanings bear much weight when we simply read Jesus' trajectory of the story. He's not getting caught in the details, or forcing anyone to languish over them in order to proceed. This is not some medieval quest with Christ behind every successive door granting further access with a correct answer.

That's exhausting. And it's not God's heart, by the way. He is not some heavenly trickster. That's the Norse god Loki. Not Jesus.

*"God has chosen to make **known** among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27)*

*"Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make **known** the mystery of the gospel." (Eph. 6:19)*

*"What if he did this (bore with great patience those deserving His wrath) to make the riches of his glory **known** to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory." (Rom. 9:23)*

And what of John's opening to his account of Jesus' life:

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." (John 1:1-4)*

You don't need to get the intricacies of the Greek idea of *logos* to understand that God is actively putting Himself out there for humanity to hear about, see, experience, know.

Reveal. Make known. Explain. Speak. Proclaim. Preach. Understand.

Scripture is full of repeated words and phrases that lead us to the overwhelmingly wonderful truth that God wants us to "get Him." Amazing. Completely other. Self-sustaining. Perfect. And yet He makes Himself know-able.

I wasn't usually the first pick for streetside football. I also wasn't usually the last. But when a "captain" passed by me, it was because he was weighing whether including me was an add or a subtract to the lineup. Let's be straight, God doesn't *need* anyone else on His team. He never has. Never will. But the prevalence of these words in the Bible might make you think otherwise. The great arc of Scripture is an always open call, where our skills or lack thereof don't matter to put on the uniform. Sure - we're invited to do some good once on the roster, but you get the idea. God is always speaking. Always clarifying. Always calling. Always inviting.

And that was wayyyy sportsy-er than I had planned for.

So, let's not allow the desire for esoteric insight to overwhelm the narrative. God is giving us a straightforward message here. No tricks.

3. Ten maidens going to meet a bridegroom. Five are called foolish. Five labeled wise -

This contrast is used exhaustively in the Bible's wisdom literature.

*"Resentment kills a fool, and envy slays the simple." (Job 5:2)*

*"The wise store up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin." (Prov. 10:14)*

*"A fool finds pleasure in wicked schemes, but a person of understanding delights in wisdom." (Prov. 10:23)*

*"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Prov. 1:7)*

The distinction is inherently based on what someone does with common information. The warning of adultery is common information, accessible to all who take more than a moment to consider it. The dangers of altering brain-chemistry is common information. The investment of resources and efforts into ventures that have a high rate of failure, even though they may promise a massive return.

All are common, understandable. Actionable. There's nothing hidden. Again, we're not being tricked. That's not to say the options are not powerful, alluring. But wisdom and foolishness is not differentiated because there were different sets of facts presented before choosing. It's the very act of choosing that creates the categories.

All ten maidens had the promise (maybe actually the call) of attending the bride and feasting with her and the groom.

Half the maidens were wise. Half foolish.

The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil (or maybe not enough oil) -

Seriously? This is where Jesus gets his listeners to go "Whaaaaaat?" You can imagine some waving Him off. Absurd. Others loved the comedy of the idea. But all were fixated.

*Where is this story going?*

In first century Palestine, day ends when the sun goes down. Largely 1800 years until a switch allows electrical current to vibrate a metal filament, creating a glow that we all now enjoy after sunset. Lamp. Oil. This is standard operating procedure for the entire world. Literally. Every maiden knew they were soon to be called out to the bridegroom. Half of them, apparently, didn't take it seriously. At least enough to personally prepare. At midnight the cry went out to meet the bridegroom. Now, it's getting real.

Oh, no. We can't go like this. Immediate regret.

Been there? Ever played the odds with time and a task and then lost?

[possible worship team late to church story]

Same thing here. The foolish maidens immediately understood their dire circumstances.

And then they hustled over to the 24hr OilMart drive-through to see if they could get back in time.

They didn't.

4. The door is shut and the banquet begins -

Oh my goodness. Tragic. Sad. The moment is dripping with remorse as the finality of the situation lands like a gut-punch on repeat. "Open the door for us!"  
"Please!"

They've disappointed the others. Dishonored the bride and groom. Basic shame and honor culture stuff but way deeper than westerners understand. What we do understand, though, is that family failure just waiting at the edge of someone's lips, to be deployed on the sly as potato salad is passed at every reunion: "Yeah, well at least they didn't miss their friend's wedding banquet." Yep - this one will be brought up, forever.

Still, the reply is more solemn and wrenching than imagined.

"Open the door for us!"

"Please!"

"We've got more oil now."

"I don't know you."

Not: "Well, you didn't follow the rules. Sorry, there's a way we do these things. You know, I can't really feel sorry for you because you should have known better."

It's way worse than that. Any of those replies would have at least acknowledged that the five were connected somehow to the bridegroom and the banquet. They were supposed to be there. They just messed up.

"I don't know you."

"Because, apparently, you don't know me."

The five dismissed the clear instructions every maiden-in-waiting was given.

Wait. With a lamp. It might be awhile. Oil.

The problem was not that the bridegroom was long in coming. The wise and the foolish maidens both slept. That was expected. Normal. No, they bought in half-way. Hedged their bets. I guess maybe oil is expensive... and they didn't want to waste it if he didn't show. That's happened before? Right?

And this is such a temptation for us: to consider issues of the Kingdom as secondary, optional. We live in a physical world. We're the generation of scientific inquiry. We're primed for what we consider to be substantive proof as the necessary condition to give anything - thoughts, claims, anything or anyone - our attention. Our investment.

When visiting friends in Kazakhstan a number of years ago, they summed up the spiritual disinterest of the country's growing, young and prosperous generation in a single phrase: "I'll think about that when I am older."

As one of the former Soviet satellite nations to actually land on its economic feet, they were quite content to explore this temporal life with little to no regard for eternity, except for a basic ninth-inning, two outs kind of approach.

If there's a wisdom-foolishness principle here it might be something like: five maidens believed the bridegroom when he said he was getting ready. Five, well sort of believed him. Five bought in fully. Five, half way. Five maidens believed and stood ready. Five weren't quite sure and believed they could respond quickly enough to still make it to their spot at the table.

5. Jesus brings it home -

Therefore... keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Keeping watch. Watching. Waiting.

For what hour? The hour of His return.

*"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Ti. 2:11-14)*

The grace of God has appeared.

It teaches us.

While we wait.  
For the blessed hope, the appearing.

### **Close and Application -**

Ok, what do we take away? While this parable has a specific timestamp to help us understand it, its application goes well beyond just to those who find themselves alive at the time of Christ's return. Because "At that time" is clearly informed by "At this time" - whatever time that may be.

So, first -

Biblical waiting (expectancy) is always active.

*"In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly." (Ps. 5:3)*

The maidens wisdom or foolishness was not a result of their immediate circumstance. Their wisdom or foolishness was revealed in that moment, but had been built and reinforced by all the days preceding it.

Their lives were the crafting of a sculpture. The moment was simply the unveiling.

Secondly,

Biblical waiting (expectancy) is more about trust than time.

*"I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope." (Psalm 130:5)*

The hours were irrelevant. The maidens trust in the word and plans of the bridegroom were what drove five of them to wisdom. His character carried the day. He was, in their estimation (faith), worth the investment and preparation.

Third,

Biblical waiting (expectancy, even long-suffering expectancy) can be joy-filled.

*"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD." (Psa. 27:14)*

Our expectancy is that good will come. Because our God is always and forever good. Our full satisfaction will only be in the full presence of Christ: when our bodies give out ("... the be

absent...”) or at His return. But we have been given a portion, a down payment in the real, present Spirit to help us navigate the long night, until the call comes and the banquet commences.

Last,

Being fully in with Jesus is sensible - another way the word translated as wise comes across in English. We are bombarded with messages that warn against overcommitting. Be guarded. Be safe. Some of this adds up when you consider flawed humanity and the ways we keep inventing to hurt each other. But we're not being asked to consider humans in this story. We're being offered the bridegroom, the only perfectly just and loving One. It only makes sense to be all in with the One that will never fail you.

### **One last word**

... to those who might say, “Yeah, I think I’m the one hedging my bets. One of the five maids who didn’t bring oil.”

Please. don’t.

The closed door image and statement “I don’t know you” echoes from other texts where Jesus painted a vision of the finality of people’s spiritual eternity. A locked entrance with no relational point of reference to even state your case for an opening is a stark image. While I try to avoid the “limited time offer” end of preaching, mostly because I am leery of emotional manipulation, I don’t see any other way to understand Jesus’ repeated use of these images. He said it often. There will be a time when there is no more time. Best to take Him at His word.

The bottom line in this story is missing out on the banquet, not fire or gnashing of teeth. If we’re going to be fair with Jesus’ teaching, we need to consider both. And you have to think the maidens who were prepared—who trusted the bridegroom fully—had a greater sense of joy, peace, and anticipation, even in the waiting.

Yes, the thief hanging next to Jesus on the cross was ushered into eternal paradise, based on a very last minute confession of faith. But you have to imagine his life could have been much different had that moment occurred earlier.

Jesus’ offer of new life now and eternal life to come is an always open proposition. You can get some oil now by simply telling Him:

*Jesus, I’ve been on the fence about You. I don’t want to do that anymore. I believe you’re the always good groom, inviting people to relationship with You, and ultimately your celebration in eternity. Please forgive me for my sin, the ways I’ve tried to live without You. I trust You fully, now and for every moment forward.*

So, this parable, like many others, is fairly easy to “get.”

But, has the parable “gotten” me? Or You?

[maybe personal last 4 months here]

Let me encourage you again that:

Loving God in a life-defining way looks like constant, joyful attention to his presence and work in my life, especially as I long for the day of His glorious return.