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Matthew 25:1-13 “Have You Prepared for His Return?”

Intro. Are you the type of person who tends to wait until the last minute to take care of important business? Do you wait until the last minute to study for an exam? Do you wait until April 14 to start on your tax return? Do you postpone going to the see the doctor until you are in great pain, when it could have been avoided by a more timely visit?

Well in this text of Scripture we have read a parable of 5 young ladies who failed to think ahead and made adequate preparation. They waited until the last minute to take care of all-important business. And they illustrate those who fail to make adequate and timely preparation for eternity. If you are one of them, I hope you will turn to the Lord today, and make sure you are ready *now* for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now in this parable our Lord uses the marriage customs of His day to illustrate several truths about His return. What is interesting is that the best Greek texts have nothing whatever to say about the bride! She isn't even mentioned! And actually, in that day, there was far less attention on the bride, and much more attention on the bridegroom. In our day, we have it reversed. We don't play, “Here Comes the Groom.” We play, ““Here Comes the Bride.” At a recent wedding, I had to ask the wedding director to hold off on sending the bridesmaids down the isle until the groom was in place. I felt that the groom should get at least some attention for a few seconds!

Well, when Jesus comes again, I can assure you that He will get the attention He deserves. All eyes will be upon Him. In fact, Rev. 1:7 says, “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him...” And if you are not ready when He comes, you will forever regret it.

So this morning I want to warn you that too many professing Christians will not be ready. They will not be caught up to meet the Lord in the air when He comes. And I want to share with you how you can be ready for the return of Jesus Christ. Now I want to start off by sharing with you from this parable the simple truth that:

I. JESUS IS COMING AGAIN

We have been talking about this for several weeks now. The signs of the times are all pointing in the direction of the fact that His coming may be soon.

Now there are several basic truths about the return of Christ that I see in this parable:

A. Christ Is Likened to a Bridegroom, Coming for His Bride – We read in v.1, “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.”¹ The focus of everyone's attention in this parable is ultimately on the bridegroom. The groom in this parable represents Jesus Christ. In Jesus' day they had a betrothal ceremony. At that time the groom would promise that he would come some day and for His bride. Even so Christ has promised to come again, and receive His bride unto Himself, just as He said in Jn.

¹ The statement, “and went out to meet the bridegroom” must be understood proleptically. The matter is here set forth in summary before being described in detail in v.10 [Hendriksen].

14:3. I believe that Christ will keep His promise. He *is* coming again, and we will spend eternity with Him in the most wonderful loving relationship you can imagine. But we also see from this parable that:

B. The Timing of His Coming Is Uncertain – We see several indications of this. First, this truth is illustrated by the marriage customs of that day. In our day, we announce well in advance the date & time of a wedding. In our Western culture, we set deadlines, and we run ourselves ragged to meet that deadline. But in the day that Jesus lived, they lived a more relaxed life. They did not set firm deadlines for themselves. So the day and time of the wedding was not known in advance, even by the groom. You see, once the engagement was formally agreed upon with vows of commitment, the groom was given adequate time to make preparation for the wedding. He had to prepare a place for them to live. He would either add onto his father's house or build his own house. He & his parents (Mt. 22:4) had to prepare for the wedding celebration. That involved obtaining and preparing quite a bit of food. Family, friends, and neighbors were invited to the wedding. They knew approximately when the wedding would take place, but no date or time was set. They just had to wait on the groom to finish everything, and they had to wait for the announcement that the groom was coming. That meant that everything was ready. There were signs that the time was drawing nigh, such as the completion of their dwelling place, but they still didn't know the exact time of the marriage. Even so, Jesus said in the last of v.13, "for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

Now there are other indications in our text of the uncertainty of the timing of our Lord's return. We read in v.5, "But while the bridegroom was delayed...." Jesus implies that His return could be delayed. In fact, it has been almost 2,000 years since Jesus promised to return. But remember, 2 Peter 3:8 says, "But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." We think we have been waiting a long time, but the Lord feels like it has only been a couple of days!

Now notice from v.5 what happened while the wedding party waited. Now these girls were at the home of the bride, waiting for the groom there, or perhaps they were at the marriage feast, waiting for the arrival of the groom there. Evening fell on another day, and they may have thought, "Perhaps the groom will come tonight!" Now one would expect that the groom would come in the early evening. But no! The groom in our story was later than expected. He was one of those night owls. To him, the night was still young at midnight! But everyone else thought you should be asleep by midnight. Amen? In fact, he was so late in arriving that all the bridesmaids in our story had already fallen asleep. They had assumed they had to wait at least one more day. So the groom came at midnight, at a time they did not expect. Even so, Jesus said back in 24:44, "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Now the main point of the parable is that we should be ready & watching for His return at any time. Jesus drives this point home to us in v.13 when He says, "Watch therefore...." I have become more convinced that to watch means to be ready at any time for the return of our Lord, for the timing of His coming is indeed unknown. Even when many of the signs that precede Christ's coming have been fulfilled, there will be a lapse of time before He returns. People will be waiting for Him, and when they see nothing happening, they will say, "Nothing's going to happen. We may as well get back into our normal routines again." And then Christ will come at a time when many will not expect.

Another truth about His coming that I see here is that:

C. His Coming Will Be Announced with a Loud Cry – Jesus said in v.6, “And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’” They didn’t have television, email, or cell phones. When an announcement was made, someone with a loud voice just went out into the streets and spoke the announcement out loud.² Even so, we read in 1 Thess. 4:16 that “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel....” The Lord’s coming will be announced with a shout.

Are you eagerly anticipating that shout, signaling the return of our Lord? What if it were today? Would you be ready?

Now we get to the best part:

D. All Who Know Him Will Be Caught Up to Meet Him – We read in the last of v.1, that when the bridegroom came, they “went out to meet the bridegroom.” Likewise, in v.6 we read, “And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’” The Greek word translated “meet” is a word that was used of a delegation going out to greet or welcoming an official dignitary. Here the bridesmaids, along with some others, were to be ready at any time to go out and greet the bridegroom, and accompany him on a joyful procession to the marriage feast. They would all go through the village at night with bright torches (see John 18:3) or lamps attached to poles³ in a celebration of singing, talking, and joy unequalled in any other social event.

Even so, when Jesus comes again, we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. We will welcome Him back with open arms. In fact, that same Greek phrase translated “to meet” [lit. “into a meeting”] is found in 1 Th. 4:17, “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” This is commonly referred to as the rapture. But if you do not truly know the Lord, you will be left behind. You will miss the most wonderful meeting of all time.

E. Then We Will Enter Into a Marriage Celebration – We read in the middle of v.10, “the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding....” Here, the word translated “wedding” (*gamos*) probably refers to “a wedding banquet, or a wedding feast” (see Mt. 22:4, 10; Luke 14:8; Rev. 19:9). The celebration would last up to 7 days. There is silence in our text as to the unspeakable joys of the wedding feast. But some faint sounds of music, singing, & dancing could be heard from the outside. Some gleams from the lighted windows find their way out. But we will see in our story that some of the invited guests were foolish. They missed that wonderful meeting and the wonderful marriage feast. They were excluded because they failed to make adequate & timely preparation.

The marriage feast pictures the joys of the future kingdom, and the joys of eternal life. You don’t want to miss out! In fact, Rev. 19:9 says, “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” It is my understanding that the marriage supper takes place on this earth at the beginning of the kingdom. Jesus said in Mt. 26:29, “But I say to you, I will not

² We are not told who did the shouting. It may have been done by the young fellows who accompanied the bridegroom. Or else, by some of the guests who had remained awake and from some dark place in or near the house had been quietly looking down the lane [Hendriksen].

³ Edersheim says, “The lamps consisted of a round receptacle for pitch or oil for the wick. This was placed in a hollow cup or deep saucer which was fastened by a pointed end into a long wooden pole, on which it was borne aloft. According to Jewish authorities, it was the custom in the East to carry in a bridal procession about ten such lamps.”

drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

Now since we do not know when Christ is coming, and since being able to meet Him at His coming is so important, that leads to my second main point:

II. WE SHOULD BE PREPARED FOR HIS COMING

This truth is illustrated by the 5 wise virgins in our story. As I have already indicated, the bridesmaids knew the bridegroom was coming, but didn't know just when. They knew that when he did come, they could join the bridegroom in a wonderful celebration. They were to have their lamps burning brightly when they went out to meet him, and escort him to the marriage celebration. They not only needed lamps, but also oil for the lamps. So thinking ahead, we read in v.4 that they "took oil in their vessels with their lamps." They did not assume that they would be able to get oil for their lamps at the last minute, by borrowing some, or by going out & buying some. No, they made preparation so that they would be ready to meet the bridegroom at any time.

Even so, we should think ahead, and make sure that we have prepared for the return of Christ. And just as the 5 wise virgins made sure they were ready at any time by securing oil for their lamps well in advance, even so we need to make spiritual preparation for His return now. First and foremost, we must make sure that we have truly repented of our sin, and placed our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. If you have done that, then you have been born again. You have been given a new heart. If you are truly saved, then you have received the Holy Spirit of God into your heart. And oil is one of the common symbols of the Holy Spirit. And notice that watching and being prepared does not mean that we must be on our tiptoes at all times in anticipation of His return. The 5 wise virgins fell asleep while the groom tarried. But what was most important was the fact that they had their oil, and they were ready at any time to go out and meet Him. And if you are truly saved, then you are ready to meet the Lord. That is what is most important.

Ah, but we have an important contrast in our story. Though we read of 5 who prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom:

III. SOME FOOLISHLY FAIL TO PREPARE!

One basic difference between being foolish and being wise is that the fool lives only for today, and doesn't think ahead. But the wise person prepares for the future. Even so, the 5 foolish virgins illustrate those who fail to prepare for the return of Christ. They make 3 foolish mistakes that are repeating by many people today. First:

A. Some Think that Physical Association with the Church Brings Salvation – The 5 foolish virgins had an outward association with the wedding party & the groom. In fact, all ten were alike in so many respects. They all professed to know the bridegroom. All are looking forward to taking part in the marriage feast. All intended to meet the bridegroom and to escort him to the place where the festivities are to be held. They all brought lamps. When the groom tarried his coming, they all went to sleep. Indeed, until the groom came, the foolish virgins looked just like the wise virgins in the wedding party. Even after the groom came, the foolish virgins talked like the others. In v.11 they called the bridegroom "Lord."

Ah, but notice in v.3 the one essential difference, “Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them.” They had lamps, but unlike the wise virgins, they had no oil. It’s not that they ran out of oil while the groom lingered. It’s that they brought no oil at all. And this was not from forgetfulness but from willful neglect, in the belief that there would be sufficient time to obtain oil *after* the announcement that the Bridegroom was coming. They were careless, not forward-looking, guilty of inexcusable and senseless neglect & shortsightedness.

Now when the groom finally came, we read in v.7, “Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.” Actually, they prepared (*kosmeo*) their lamps for burning. As they lit their wicks, even the lamps of the foolish virgins burned briefly, but they said in v.8, “our lamps are going out.” Of course! Without oil, there was no way that their lamps or torches would stay lit. Thus, their lamps quickly began to flicker and sputter and die down. A torch would have to be re-oiled from time to time from a flask of oil in order to continue to burn brightly for the whole processional.

Outwardly all the virgins are the same; what distinguishes them is their supply of oil. Thus, they were totally unprepared to meet the bridegroom. They illustrate the many who have the look of a believer, and even the language of a believer, but not the life of a believer. Too many have had a profession of faith without a possession of faith. So we see that it is possible for professing Christians to live a lifetime, and never to be found out either by themselves or by anybody else. But the Lord can look at all those who go to church and profess to be Christians with eyes as flames of fire. He knows who is truly His and who isn’t. He knows who is wise and who isn’t. In that day I think there will be quite a few phonies who will find out that they were fools. Paul warned in 2 Tim. 3:5 that in the last days, there will be some “having a form of godliness but denying its power.” Don’t make that mistake! Make sure your faith is real.

Now this leads to the second foolish assumption:

B. Some Think You Can Obtain Salvation from Others – In v.8 we read, “And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’” But notice the reply of the wise maidens in v.9, “No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.” Instead of finding fault with these girls because of their heartlessness, we must try to understand their situation. Wedding processions generally moved slowly. Not only must the girls go out to meet the bridegroom; they must also escort him through the village and back to the house with their lamps still brightly burning all the time. If they shared their oil then *their* lamp would not stay lit the whole time. So their reply is not unreasonable. Perhaps you have heard someone say to you, “You’re lack of preparation does not create a crisis on my part.”

What we learn from this is the fact that no one can be saved on the strength of someone else’s spiritual experience. The faith of your parents or your spouse will not save you. It is not from our fellows, however bright their lamps, that we can ever get that inward grace. None of them has more than suffices for his own needs, nor can any give it to another. Salvation is not transferable from one person to another. No one can give you salvation.

The lesson is plain. Each person is responsible for their own spiritual condition, and we can only get the new life we need from God when He gives you the opportunity. And when can we obtain this life? Well, don’t make the third mistake:

C. Some Think You Can Be Saved *When* Christ Returns – When Christ returns, and we enter into the marriage celebration with Him, the door of opportunity to be saved will be shut

forever. For notice in v.10 of our story that we read that after the groom & the wedding party arrived at the marriage feast, “the door was shut.” Meanwhile, the foolish virgins had gone into the dark night to buy oil. They hoped to awaken some seller of oil to buy what they needed. And while they were gone, the bridegroom arrived. His coming was swift & unexpected, like a flash of lightning, or the swoop of an eagle. So suddenly Christ will come, and after that shout from heaven there will not be time for anything else. If you are not saved, you will not have time to get saved. It will be too late.

We see this truth from the rest of our story. In our story the groom & his guests entered into the wedding feast & notice that he shut the door (cf. Lk. 13:24-28). Then we read in v.11, “Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’” But it was too late! Their primary function was to provide light for the wedding procession, and now the opportunity to fulfill that purpose was forever past. And the door was not opened to them, for the groom answered them in v.12, “Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.” 2 Tim. 2:19 says, “The Lord knows those who are his.” So the others never get in. Surely the unending darkness of a hopeless exclusion settles down on these sad five maidens, standing, huddled together, at the door. It’s too late. The wedding bell has become a funeral knell. What a tragedy! They were not the enemies of the bridegroom. In fact, they thought themselves his friends. But they were missing the one thing that would have provided them entrance into the marriage feast. Are you missing the one thing you need to enter into the eternal kingdom of God? Church membership will not get you in. Baptism will not get you in. Good works will not get you in. Only a saving experience with Jesus Christ will get you in.

Then Jesus drives home the main lesson of the parable in v.13. Christ is saying that preparedness is essential, for the time is coming when getting ready will no longer be possible. It is impossible in the day of Christ’s coming to make up for neglect of previous preparation. So there must be no delay in getting ready for the return of Christ, for once He has returned, the door of grace is irrevocably closed! Even if you’re only a little too late, you will be *forever* too late. Imagine the sheer terror of those who will face God someday, realizing that they have been caught unprepared and the door to the kingdom is shut. The time to get saved is now!

The steamer *Central America*, on a voyage from New York to San Francisco, sprung a leak in mid-ocean. A vessel seeing her signal of distress bore down toward her, and the captain of the rescue ship cried, "Let me take your passengers aboard now." But it was night and the commander of the *Central America* feared to send his passengers away in the darkness; and, thinking they could keep afloat a while longer, replied, "Lie by till morning." About an hour and a half later the lights were missed. All on board perished, because they thought they could be saved better at another time.

Even so it is foolish indeed to wait until the last minute to get right with God. There is no second chance once you die, or once Christ returns. The Bible says, "Now is the accepted time" (2 Cor. 6:2).

Conclusion: If Christ were to come today would you be ready? If you were to die today, would you be ready? Have you made preparation to meet the Lord?

There's a book that came out several years ago that gives you instructions on what to do in the direst circumstances that you can imagine. It's called *The Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. It has sold millions of copies and it covers every kind of situation you can imagine: “How to Perform an Emergency Tracheotomy. What to Do If You Run Into a Mountain Lion. How to Respond If You Jump Out of a Plane and the Parachute Doesn't Open.” Now it’s written

straight. It actually is advice from experts in their fields — the best advice on what to do in these types of situations. But nobody buys the book for the actual advice. It is sold in humor sections of bookstores as kind of a joke. [John Ortberg].

Well the Bible says that Jesus is coming again, and it's no joke. And the Bible tells you not only how to survive His coming, but how to enter into an eternal kingdom of great love, joy, & peace. Don't be foolish like these 5 maidens. Now is the time to make sure you are prepared for the return of Christ. The door into the kingdom is open now. But someday it will be shut. Don't think that just because you attend church, or just because you are a member of a church, that means you are ready for the return of Christ. The apostle Paul wrote, "Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). Don't wait until it is too late to discover that you need to be saved.

Sources: Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2006; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); John MacArthur, Jr., *Signs of Christ's Return: Matthew 24-25* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Warren W. Wiersbe read, but no notes from that source used.

Note: I sought to avoid the mistake of assigning allegorical meaning to the incidental details of the parable: that the girls were sleeping, that they were virgins, or that there were 10 of them, etc. ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

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