

Jesus' Greatest Hits

The Ten Virgins

Part 8 - July 15, 2007

[VIDEO: GRAND WILLOW GAZEBO]

How hard is it to light a candle? Not too tough ... unless you're a candle-lighter at a wedding; and all eyes are staring at YOU. Then, just lighting a candle can be nerve-wracking! Especially if your candle-lighter goes out just as the ceremony gets started.

In Jesus' day, they didn't use candles, they used torches. The bridesmaids would wait for the groom to arrive, at night, and then they would lead him to his bride, and then light the way for the wedding procession. In the parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus warns us to "tend our torches" ... so that, when He arrives, we'll be shining brightly.

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, 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. "Sir! Sir!" they said. "Open the door for us!" But he replied, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you." Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

- *Matthew 25:1-13 NIV*



The New Testament metaphor, of the church as Jesus' *bride* is so familiar, it merits pointing out that there's *no* bride mentioned in the parable of the Ten Virgins. That actually personalizes this parable. Together (as the church), we are like a bride. But, individually, as disciples, we're like *bridesmaids*.



And notice that there are *no* unbelievers in this parable. All ten bridesmaids, both wise *and* foolish, represent *believers*. They *all* began with lit oil-filled lamps. They were *all* eager to go to meet the groom. But, some were *prepared* and some *weren't*. So, this story is about you and I as disciples and whether we're properly prepared to carry out our responsibilities with wisdom.



I said that a few days before His crucifixion, Jesus took His disciples to the Mount of Olives and told them the parable of the Talents. These two parables were told back to back. The Talents is about working, and being productive. The Ten Virgins is about watching, and being prepared.

But, they both concern Jesus' return and judgment. Usually, when He told a parable to demonstrate the Kingdom, Jesus began by saying, "The Kingdom *is* like ...". But, with both of these back-to-back examples, He says:

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ... - *Matthew 25:1a NIV*

And in this parable he let His disciples know that He would be gone a whole lot longer than they thought. That's why the wise *and* the foolish both fall asleep waiting for the groom.

There was something that bothered me at first, in this story. It's how the *wise* virgins seem to act kind of ... selfishly. The foolish girls say: "Can you share your oil!" And then the wise girls say: "NO! GET YOUR OWN!" The key to understanding this is in their *actual* response:

There may not be enough for both us and you. - *Matthew 25:9 NIV*

The type of "lamps" mentioned here would've either been:

- A. Oil soaked rags, wrapped around the end of a pole.
- B. Small earthen jars with a wick, held up on a pole.

Either way, they'd only burn for about fifteen minutes. And to let the lamps run dry in a middle-Eastern wedding ceremony would be nothing short of a crisis. In fact, this may just be the first recorded mid-East oil crisis!

They're not being selfish, they're protecting the ceremony. If they shared the oil, *all* of the lamps would've gone out. So, the unprepared bridesmaids run away to buy oil at *midnight*.

There are three really clear points for us here:



1. Oil runs out (it has to be replenished)

Ever feel like you're "running a quart low"? We need to be refueled and recharged through prayer, scripture, and honest sharing with other believers. If I don't prepare to be replenished, I will run dry.

It's foolish to depend on the faith and obedience I had fifteen days ago, let alone fifteen *years* ago! Oil runs out.



2. You can't borrow oil

We each bear our own load. We won't go to heaven because the people close to us (parents, spouse, or friends) live a life of obedience and faithfulness. It's like asking a classmate to study for a test for me. They'd say, "I can only study for me." It's not selfish, it's reality. No one else can prepare for you.

As parents we can struggle against the temptation to minimize or remove the consequences of our children's poor choices ... trying to prepare *for* them, instead of truly helping them to prepare.



3. Don't wait till it's too late

They don't sell oil at midnight no matter how desperate you are! The most terrifying line in this story is only five words long:

And the door was shut. - *Matthew 25:10 NIV*



What a graphic metaphor for the finality of God's judgment on injustice, rebelliousness, and unrighteousness. The day of salvation is a limited time offer! When we stand before the Lord, whether He comes to us, or we go to Him, the time for 2nd chances has expired.



Q: So, if you knew He was coming at midnight, what would you change this afternoon? And ... what're you waiting for?! To be ready for tomorrow you prepare for today. A time is coming when no further preparation is possible: the door is shut! But, if you've prepared for today, you'll be ready for tomorrow.

The big question from this parable is: "Am I a fool?" The Bible doesn't equate foolishness with lacking intelligence. A "fool" is a person - regardless of intelligence - who doesn't use their intelligence *wisely* (it is a *moral* foolishness).



It's similar to our popular cultural term: "Dysfunctional". SIDEBAR: The next time you're reading Proverbs, mentally replace the word "foolish" with the word "dysfunctional" and you'll see the sayings in a whole new light.

The wise make good choices simply because they put *truth* into practice. The foolish *hear* the truth, but fail to act on it.

First-century weddings were basically the only diversion besides the religious holidays; and they involved the entire community. It was common for a wedding feast to last seven days. They usually began with a reception at the bride's father's house.

In this part of the festivities, after a day of dancing, they'd wait for, and guess at, the surprise arrival of the groom. If he took long, they'd nap in preparation of the late party. The bride's *unmarried* friends (hence *virgins*) ran with torch in hand to meet the groom, lead him to his bride, and then parade the entire village to the groom's house for the ceremony.

Q: Now, the bridesmaids' foolishness was obvious when their lamps went out. But, when was the error actually committed?

A: Long before the wedding; it was when they *bought* the oil.

Picture this group of excited girls in the marketplace together, with spending money! They're looking at bracelets and necklaces and perfume that they'd love to wear to the wedding. But, they are there for wedding lamps and oil. The oil seller would try to talk them into buying extra: "You never know how late that groom will be!"

It is here, in the midst of the marketplace with all of its temptations that the foolish separate themselves from the wise. Only the girls who had prioritized their mission (to shine their light and serve the bridegroom) would act in wisdom.



The others, who put distraction above duty, would ignore the truth they were hearing, and decide on the *least amount* they could get away with buying. Be wise, prioritize!

Q: How do you suppose that bracelet looked when the oil ran out?

They had the look. They dressed the part. Their lamps were polished. They had the religion, but no light and no power. Their lack of preparation revealed a lack of adoration.

And they missed it all; the part where they got to run out and grab the groom, and pull him to his bride; the procession of singing and dancing and celebration; the ceremony; and the feast. They failed to act on truth, and the door was shut.

Q: Will the midnight cry find you out of oil, or filled and ready?

Let's see how well you've been listening; answer *true* or *false* when I ask the questions. In this passage, we've learned that:

1. If we believe in God, we'll automatically be prepared.
2. Our lamps will burn out if they're not replenished.
3. And the door was left open, just a little.
4. If I read "Left Behind" I'll know *exactly* when He's coming.