

The Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids

Matthew 25:1-13

Pastor Tom
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We are in the wedding season. Late Spring and Summer seem to be the busiest times for weddings. Some of you may have already attended or participated in a wedding this year. Some of you look forward to weddings later this summer. Many of you who are or were married remember your wedding day.

A lot of factors can contribute to memories on wedding days. People, the weather, the ceremony or some moment can stick with us for years to come. I remember doing something on our wedding day that led to quite the memory. The groomsmen all stayed at our place the night before the wedding. The next day, the ceremony was scheduled to start at 1 PM. So we decided it would be early enough to leave for the wedding at 12:30. We arrived at 12:50. The pastor was furious with how late we were. We received a message from him – “Get your butts downstairs to get your flowers on.” Lori and her bridesmaids had been at the church for nearly an hour preparing. And we barely arrived on time. So with that scolding ringing in our ears we went out to start the ceremony.

Some of you may have other wedding stories about the start time. I found a few more stories on a wedding discussion page. One bride shared the story that her ceremony had to be postponed because her father forgot his false teeth. How you do that – I don’t know. So the uncle had to swing by the bride’s parent’s home to pick up the teeth while everyone waited at the church. When the uncle arrived, the father slipped in his false teeth seconds before he walked his daughter down the aisle.

Another bride shares how she was over an hour later for her wedding. She was in the back seat of the car as her step father and her mother drove her to the Church. They got hopelessly lost in the days before cell phones. They finally came to a phone booth but someone was using the phone. The bride stood there in her wedding dress trying to get them to finish their call because she was late. But the person in the phone booth made her wait another 10 minutes. Eventually she arrived. The ceremony went well and it’s been an even better marriage.

Another bride tells the story that she was 90 minutes late to her wedding because her mother and her got into a spat over how to wear her hair. The mother tried to redo the hair failing miserably. It took a long time to fix. The guests started to wonder if she’d gotten cold feet. So the photographer began taking pictures of people pointing to their watches and the clock in the church. Eventually she arrived and is still married to her husband of 15 years.

Now in our culture, we're a lot more relaxed than we used to be about wedding protocol and start times. Even if our guests are late to a wedding, most people don't pay much attention. But in other cultures, lateness or unpreparedness for a wedding can be a huge insult or sign of disrespect. We will see how this plays out in today's Scripture. A wedding serves as the setting for this passage. The focus of the story is not on the bride but on her bridesmaids and the groom.

As we look at this story, we will discover another piece of Jesus' teaching about discipleship in light of the end times. We have been contemplating what it means for us to live in a way that we are prepared for Jesus' return at any moment. Remember the context? It is Tuesday of Jesus' final week on earth. He sits on the Mount of Olives with his disciples while they look across the valley at the massive temple complex in Jerusalem. Jesus predicted this complex faced destruction. So the disciples ask "when will these things be and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

Jesus responds by giving them some signs and direction on how to live in light of the coming destruction of the temple, the end of the age and His return. Throughout Matthew 24, Jesus talks more about the signs and the ways they will know about the closeness of His return. His return is certain, but, "No one knows the day or the hour." People will be going about their ordinary activities on that day.

God's people cannot just do whatever they want until Christ returns. They must be ready. We ended last time with the little parable about the faithful and wicked servant. The faithful servant went about the work given by his master until his master returns. The wicked servant notes the delay of the master's return and then takes advantage of it. Then the master's return surprises the servant. He faces dire consequences. Jesus has raised the question "are you ready for my return at any time?"

Jesus addresses this question from another angle with this wedding parable. Today, I want you to give you answers to a couple of questions. What will happen to those ready and unready for the return of Christ? What does it mean to be ready or unready?

Matthew 25:1-13 (ESV)

25 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their

lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The parable begins with 10 young women or virgins who take their lamps to meet the bridegroom. But what were they doing in going out to meet the groom with lamps? Bridesmaids today don't do that. So we have to try to understand 1st century Jewish weddings to figure out what's going on. It went something like this. The groom, his attendants and his parents would process to the house of the bride's parents. They would bring gifts to pay the bride price set by the bride's parents. So there may have been some money exchanged. More likely, the groom's parents paid the bride price with gifts. But would the bride's parents agree that these gifts met the bridal price?

Say you were the bride's parents and you set the bridal price at ten thousand dollars. The groom's parents arrive at your house with a flat screen TV. They claim it's worth ten thousand dollars. I've seen it at Costco for \$5000. So you would enter into negotiations until you, the bride's parents were satisfied that the gifts met the bridal price. Now we can't imagine such a process happening just before a wedding. But this was apparently normal practice especially in a bartering culture.

Now through all this negotiation over the value of gifts and these ceremonies, the bridesmaids wait outside. They will participate in one of the highlights of the wedding – the torch light procession. The groom and bride would come out together and would walk with or between the bridesmaids with their torches lit back to the house of the groom's parents. Upon arrival, there would be a great wedding feast that often went on for 7 days. The bride and groom would initially live in his parent's house or in a room attached to that house.

So with that in mind let's go back to this parable. So the bridesmaids in this parable go out to meet the groom. Likely waiting for him to come out of the bride's family's house. It seems the bridesmaids have their torches already lit. But the groomsman is delayed. Jesus tells us that of these 10 bridesmaids, 5 were wise and 5 were foolish. The foolish had their lamps but took no extra oil with them. The wise took their lamps and had flask of oil with them. Now how did these lamps work?

Well they weren't like the ones portrayed in this power point which are more like lanterns from the late 1000's. For most poor people in the first century wedding procession, a lamp was nothing more than a rag dipped in oil and then wrapped around a longer stick. Then you'd light the rag on fire. So it was more like a torch. Apparently, the light lasted for about 15 minutes before you need to add some more oil.

So the 5 wise bridesmaids arrive with their lamps or torches already lit and ready to meet the bridegroom. The 5 foolish bridesmaids arrive with their torches already lit, ready to meet the bridegroom. But they only have 15 minutes of light. Apparently the bridegroom and his family are in the bride's house negotiating over the bride's price or finishing the ceremonies. Sometimes these negotiations could last a long time.

So all of the bridesmaids fall asleep because the bridegroom is delayed. But at midnight, a cry rings out in the night – "Here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him." Suddenly, the bridesmaids are jolted awake. They get their lamps ready for the procession. But all their lamps have gone out or are barely flickering. The foolish have no oil to reignite their lamps. So they ask the wise to give them some oil. But the wise answer, "there's not enough for all of our lamps." Maybe the wise brought enough oil for another soaking of the rag and 15 minutes more of light that would suffice for the procession back to the groom's house. Maybe the procession would take 10 minutes. So if they split their oil with the foolish, all the lamps would go out before the procession was over. This would be a great disgrace to the groom, the bride and their families. Instead the wise say "go into town to get some oil for your torches."

Now we might think that's weird because it's midnight and all stores would be closed. But apparently, if there was a wedding in a village, some dealers were available for additional sales. So the foolish depart to go and get more oil. But while they are gone, the bridegroom comes out maybe bringing his bride out of her house and they process to his parent's house. Then everyone goes inside to the marriage feast and the door is shut.

Later, the foolish arrive likely with their torches lit. They find the door to groom's house shut. So they cry out, "Lord, lord, open to us."

Now it's likely the disciples would have expected some sort of reprimand for these foolish bridesmaids. They were poorly prepared. They had shown little or no regard for a possible delay of the bridegroom. It was more like they planned for him to show according to their timetable. So maybe it was appropriate that they would be banned from the feast for

that first night. But the bridegroom would know who they were. Maybe he or his parents would admit them to the feast on the second or third day.

But this bridegroom pronounces sober words. “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” There is no hope for invitation into the feast. There is no opportunity to make amends. He will not even see them. This must have shocked them because they fully expected to be going to the marriage feast. Jesus then applies the parable. “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

So in this parable, the bridegroom is God. The delayed arrival is seen as a delay in Christ’s return. The sudden cry at midnight is the sudden arrival of Christ. The bridesmaids are people who claim to be one of God’s people. They come in two groups – those who are ready and those who are not.

So now we can answer our first question. **What will happen to those ready and unready for the return of Christ? The ready will be admitted to Christ’s great marriage supper. The unready will be shut out from Christ’s great marriage supper with no possibility of getting in.** The ready will be admitted to heaven. The unready will be shut out of heaven. The ready will enjoy the presence of Christ and eternal life with God. The unready will be separated from Christ and eternal life with God. That’s the stark clear message of the parable. So Jesus concludes it with the warning – “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Or “Stay ready because you never know when Christ will return.

What does it mean to be ready? Well, like the bridegroom was delayed, God may delay Christ’s return longer than people expect. So like the wise bridesmaids, his followers must be prepared for such a delay. So we remain ready by **persevering in discipleship.** To live in a state of readiness for Christ’s return we have to be prepared for Him to come today or 100 years from now. That will take perseverance. Everyone could get excited and ready for the return of Christ if He announced He was coming back tomorrow. But to live in a state of readiness for an unknown return date is a lot harder.

Everyone is excited about a new initiative. But when the initiative or project is several months underway and there’s still a long way to completion, perseverance is required. It can be exciting to begin a new course of study. But when you’re on page 100 of 500 in a text book, it takes perseverance to finish. It’s exciting when we start the Christian life and enjoy forgiveness. But continuing to walk with Christ through years of maybe less exciting spiritual experiences requires perseverance. Discipleship is often more difficult than we expect.

To be ready we must put our trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; stay close to Christ and grow in Him; loving God and people; striving to be in right relationship with God and others; giving life, time, talents and resources for the kingdom of heaven; saying yes to Christ and no to the world.

For as Commentator Michael Wilkins writes - *At the end of life or at the return of Jesus, it will be too late to get ready. We must be spiritually prepared to meet Jesus now. I especially see in young people a feeling that they are invincible. They operate as though they believe they will have plenty of time to get their life straightened out later on. But one of the great lessons that leads to maturity is that our life is not our own, and it can be taken away at any moment. When young people realize that, they recognize that they must get prepared spiritually so that they are ready.*

We are ready when our relationships with God and others are what they should be. We are ready when at any moment of our day, whether in the privacy of our home or in the apartment of our girlfriend or in the recesses of our mind, we are not ashamed to have the Lord meet us. We are also ready when we make sure that our children are adequately cared for, when we will not be ashamed at our credit card accounts being made public. We are ready when we forgive those who have sinned against us.

What does it mean to be unready? It means to not trust Christ; not be serious about staying close to Christ or growing in Him; showing no concern for right relationship with God and others. It means to use life, time, talents and resources for something other than the kingdom of heaven. It means saying yes to the world and no to Christ. Scholar Craig Blomberg writes, *“Like the foolish bridesmaids, those who do not prepare adequately (for Christ’s return) may discover a point beyond which there is no return – when the end comes it will be too late to undo the damage of neglect.”*

What will happen to those who are ready and unready for Jesus’ return? The ready will be admitted to His kingdom. The unready will be shut out. To be ready means to persevere in discipleship or follow Christ every day. But that’s hard and vigorously opposed by the devil and our own sinful nature. I don’t want you to walk out of here today thinking “I’ve just got to try way harder on my own in hopes that I’m ready.” **To be ready for Christ’s return, we must persevere in discipleship BY GOD’S STRENGTH.** By God’s Strength, we can persevere in discipleship to be ready for Christ’s return. God provides many resources to help us. He gives the Holy Spirit who lives in us, convicts us and empowers us to say no to sin. He has given us the Word of God; the Bible which serves as daily and even hourly food for our soul. He has given us the church and other believers who spur us on in our faith. He has given us prayer where we can talk to him at

any moment. He has given us His grace by which we minister and carry out the work He calls us to do. He gives us people who help us; opportunities to embrace; situations to grow us; authors who inspire us. He gives us all we need to live Godly lives until our death or Christ's return.

For no one knows the day or the hour. And as Blomberg has observed, Jesus has now given the disciples and us 3 different pictures about to remind us of that. In the first little parable about His return as it was in the days of Noah, we learned his return will be completely unexpected. In the parable of the wise and wicked servant, the master returns earlier than expected. In this parable, He returns later than expected. No one knows the day or the hour.

But we can be in a state of continuous readiness by persevering in discipleship by God's strength. If you're already doing that, Jesus affirms that. You're ready for His coming. If you're not or you've been slipping away will you confess that today? Don't wait to get ready? As God has spoken this morning, will you adjust, change, repent and stop procrastinating when it comes to your walk with God?

We may have been or will be unready for the start of our wedding ceremony. But we cannot be unready for the return of Christ. I pray everyone here will be ready on that day. Let's pray.