

Wise Waiters
Matthew 25.1-13

Mike Elliott • Dominion Covenant Church • January 4, 2009

Introduction

When I hiked the Continental Divide from Canada to Mexico it was a long journey but I had one central fact in my mind that kept me going: it was the knowledge that winter came early to the San Juan Mountains in Southern Colorado. You don't want to be hiking those open slopes and ridges at 12000 feet when snowstorms are rolling in.

That reminder was especially helpful in June and July when I battled high water in creeks or bugs, or heat—it was easy to get bogged down in the short-term trials but never far from my mind was the thought that it would be a lot worse later if I didn't continue to make progress.

Ultimately I hiked on ahead of the two guys I began the trek with because we didn't share the same vision, the same urgency, about our itinerary. One of them was especially lackadaisical (easy-going, he would have called it). He had no urgency. Now, it is a good thing to be in the moment soaking in the present beauty; after all you don't want to be so obsessed with tomorrow that you never enjoy today. However, you don't want to be so Today-focused that you lose your long-range vision. I tried very hard to enjoy the moment *and* be sure I kept it moving!

Ultimately I ran into one early storm in the northern San Juans which lasted part of one day, melted off, and gave me clear sailing through a week's worth of hiking in one of the most beautiful mountain ranges I have ever seen. When the other guys got there, about three weeks after me, they trudged through snow for days as they approached the San Juans and then had to take a detour *around* the San Juans because they were impassible. I tried really hard not to gloat when I heard about that; after all, the snow they did endure was far more than I think I could have handled so I gave them a lot of credit. However, I couldn't fail to remember those June days in Montana when I warned them about September snow. "I told ya so!"

This text we will look at today contains a similar story of preparedness, endurance, and attentiveness. This parable is focused on critical events in the future that we must not ignore or defer till tomorrow. We can't say, "Let tomorrow take care of itself, enjoy today!" Noooo. That is a dangerous and immature way to go about life.

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With the wise ones we must act today in accordance with a proper understanding of tomorrow.

At the beginning of chapter 24 Jesus makes a ground shaking prediction, "**not one stone [of the temple] will be left here upon another**" (24.2). It is like me saying to my hiking partners, "the snow is going to be up to your hips."

Understandably the disciples want to know some more information about this, specifically they ask, "**when will these things be? and what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?**" (24.3)

Jesus answers their questions with a lengthy response (it covers 2.5 pages in my Bible). He begins with a straightforward explanation followed by a series of parables.

I. Timing

A. Part one.

In understanding Jesus' answer, it is necessary that we understand he is speaking of two events. One will have clearly identified preceding events and will be witnessed by his own generation. The other will be a surprise and occur after a delay.

It is outside the scope of today's parable to deal with this earlier event, the one that occurred in his generation and is thus past.

1. Signs of the Times, Great Tribulation, Cloud Coming of the Son of Man.

Suffice it to say there were visible preceding indicators (v6) "**wars and rumors of wars**", (v7) "**famines, pestilences, and earthquakes**", (v9) "**tribulation [of persecution]**", (v11) "**false prophets**", (v12) "**lawlessness will abound**", (v15) "**the abomination of desolation...standing in the holy place**", (v24) "**false christ's and false prophets**". –these are all signs of the times so his audience will know what is happening.

2. Parable of Fig Tree.

Jesus illustrates this event, this portion of his answer, with the parable of the fig tree, vv 32-33. Just as the fig tree gives an advance indicator that summer is near, so too will there be advance signs that the Temple's Destruction.

3. His generation.

And, as verse 34 so clearly states it, this was to be seen by people of his generation, **"I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place."**

So, Jesus has answered the first part of their question by giving a number of signs of the times that they, their generation, will see.

B. Part two.

Jesus then moves on to the other part of the question. (v36) **"But of that day and hour no one knows."** Apparently *that* day is different than these days he has just described. These days would have advance notice, lots of indicators to give people warning; *that* day would be a surprise. These days refer to the destruction of the temple he had spoken of in verse 2; *that* day refers to the final end of the age, what is referred to as his Second Coming, Second Advent.

1. No one knows Day or Hour, Judging the Nations.

Twice he repeats this surprise aspect: (v42) **"you do not know what hour your Lord is coming"**; and (v44) **"the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."**

2. Parable of Faithful Servant, Parable of Virgins, Parable of Talents.

To illustrate this future event and its surprise delayed aspects, Jesus gives a series of parables. The first very clearly teaches (v50) that the master will come at an unanticipated hour. The third parable teaches (25.29) that if we are faithful with what the master has trusted to us then we will be rewarded with more when our master finally returns after a long, distant journey (25.19). The second parable is our focus for the day and we'll get to it in a moment.

3. Future.

Thus far we have established that the fact that the "That Day" event of chapter 24 verse 36 and following was to be long-delayed and when it did finally come it would be a surprise.

So, let us take a closer look at the parable of the Virgins which Jesus gives to illustrate these truths.

II. Kingdom of Heaven

A. Usage.

Coming to our focus text we are immediately confronted with a critically important phrase, "kingdom of heaven".

The phrase is used about a dozen times in the Old Testament, mostly in Daniel (ex: 2.44), and 31 times in the New Testament, all in Matthew. The other gospels use the phrase "Kingdom of God" and the fact that the terminology differs has led some to conclude that they refer to different things. (See the Dispensationalist literature.)

However, this is not so. Matthew speaks of events relating to the Kingdom Heaven, while the same events, when spoken of by Mark or Luke are said to relate to the Kingdom of God. In Matthew, the Parables of the Wheat/Tares, Mustard Seed, and Leaven all employ the term "Kingdom of Heaven"; these same Parables, in the hands of Luke and Mark, employ the term "Kingdom of God"¹. Clearly they are synonyms and we need not be confused by the variety. They both refer to the same thing.

B. Meaning.

1. Key to Christ's mission.

In essence they refer to the dominion of God through the Messiah culminating in a restored and renewed world.

Turn with me to Matthew 3. Here we see John the Baptist, the forerunner, proclaiming what & whom he is coming in advance of. In verse 2 he says *what* he is coming ahead of: "**the kingdom of heaven is at hand!**"; in verse 3 he says *who* he is coming ahead of: "**prepare the way for the LORD**" (later explained to be Jesus). Clearly the man-Jesus is identified with his work-of-inaugurating the kingdom of heaven/God.

Turn with me to Matthew 5. Here we read the Sermon on the Mount and see multiple references to kingdom living: verse 3, verse 10, verse 19. His sermon shows that it takes a Spirit-filled, reborn, and transformed person to exhibit kingdom living.

¹ Sowing good seed—Mt 13.24ff ("of heaven"), Mk 4.26ff ("of God"). Mustard seed—Mt 13.31ff ("of heaven"), Mk 4.30ff ("of God"), Lk 13.18ff ("of God"). Leaven—Mt 13.33 ("of heaven"), Lk 13.20ff ("of God"). King's marriage feast for his son—Mt 22.2ff ("of heaven"), Lk 14.16ff ("of God"). Man traveling to far country—Mt 25.14ff ("of heaven"), Lk 19.12ff ("of God").

Finally, John records (18.36) Jesus' acknowledgment that he is a king, but his kingdom is not of this world, i.e. it does not need earthly means to advance it and it stems from a heavenly kingdom that is progressively being manifested on earth.

Taken together we see that Christ's earthly mission was to inaugurate a new age by empowering his people to live in a new way until that kingdom finally and fully comes at the end of the age.

2. Key to our mission.

So the work of the kingdom of heaven began with Christ's earthly ministry, but it did not end there. Through his power it continues through his church; that is, us! Thankfully for us, the New Testament writers recorded what this kingdom work and life looks like.

In Acts 9 Philip was recognized as a worthy preacher of the Kingdom—he preached the word and proclaimed Christ. In Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas preach the gospel, make disciples, and strengthen the disciples by encouraging them to persevere and thereby enter into the Kingdom. In Acts 19 Paul preached about the Kingdom for 3 months but ultimately many rejected the message and spoke evil against the Way. In Acts 20 Paul gives his farewell speech and says he preached the Kingdom of God and "**did not draw back from declaring...all the counsel of God.**" (v27) The examples continue in Acts 28 and in the epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Timothy, etc. The point is that the core task of the apostles, and of us as Christ's followers, is to labor for the Kingdom, preach the Kingdom, and look forward to seeing the fully manifested Kingdom.

With that understanding of what the Kingdom is, we can now look at what this parable says about living in light of the Kingdom.

Jesus illustrates his point with the story of a wedding feast.

III. The Bridegroom

It is likely that this is a not so subtle reference to the wedding feast that will occur at the consummation, when the bride of Christ, the church, is united with her husband, Christ himself, the bridegroom. In Psalm 45 and throughout the New Testament he is depicted in this way. He is espoused to the church (Hosea 2.19) but the marriage itself awaits the day when the bride has been made ready, as depicted in Revelation 19.7.

IV. The Virgins

Jesus explains there are 10 virgins waiting to go into the feast—five are foolish and five are wise. These attendants to the wedding festivities represent the members of the church. They are rightly called virgins, denoting their purity and chastity. They have kept themselves sexually pure which represents their abstention from all uncleanness and idolatry.

Paul earnestly desired that the Corinthians would be kept pure and holy. He wanted to present them **as a chaste virgin to Christ.** (2Cor 11.2) It is the prerogative of all Christians to maintain that physical and spiritual purity until the day of the Lord.

Of course we are all guilty of violating that physical and spiritual purity but all hope is not lost. Jesus came to save sinners; he came to heal the sick. Often times Paul gives consolation to his readers by reminding them that formerly they were heinous sinners BUT no more; they have been **"washed...sanctified...justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."** (1Cor 6.44) We all need to be clean and spotless, by ourselves we are far from that, but in Christ it is accomplished.

(1) Committed to serve.

Both groups of virgins, then, share much in common. They have made an outward profession of interest, faith as it were, to the bridegroom. They are committed to serve the bridegroom and wait for his arrival. So too are members of the Church committed to look and long for his arrival and to serve him in our praise and in our very lives.

(2) Shining lights.

In this parable the specific function of the virgins is to provide light for the procession. Light is intimately involved with the gospel—Jesus is the **true light which gives light to every man coming into the world** (Jn 1.9); those who receive the gospel have been enlightened (Eph 1.18) and are charged to **shine as lights in the world** (Phil 2.15). Lacking light, or losing your light, is a sign of rebuke and judgment (Rev 18.23). Both the wise and the foolish have some light. We'll see shortly who has enough and who lacks.

(3) Sleeping.

Another thing the wise and foolish have in common is that they all fall sleep. Various commentators take this to represent death. **It is appointed for men to die once, after this the judgment.** (Heb 9.27) And sure enough

after they have fallen asleep the bridegroom's arrival is announced followed by judgment.

A. The foolish

Both groups of virgins start off well, but obviously the foolish are the example of what *not* to do. Just by their introduction we can be pretty sure that things aren't going to turn out so well for them.

1. Correct action—they did go out to meet the bridegroom.

But notice again they did have a good start. They *did* go out to meet the bridegroom. Outward appearances would indicate that they were interested in the Lord and desired to be part of the party. They could have been doing far worse by ignoring the festivities.

2. Faulty behavior—they weren't prepared.

However, their apparently commendable initial actions had a fatal flaw. They were superficial. They had **a form of godliness** (2 Tim 3.5) but lacked the real thing. They weren't ready for the long haul. They didn't even have to weather any storms or persecutors, all they had to do was be patient. Scripture warns us that true believers will endure to the end, through a whole range of trials, and that by enduring the true believers will be distinguished from the false believers.

At the beginning of the wait no doubt the foolish and wise for the most part appeared the same. The wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, are difficult to distinguish. But at the proper time they will be distinguished and the fakes won't be able to continue in their disguise.

3. Tragic result—not at the wedding feast.

When the time comes in the Parable for the rubber to meet the road, the imposters are revealed. They simply are not ready. They faced a closed door (v10) and the bone-chilling response: "**I do not know you**" (v12). Interestingly they seem to be genuinely eager to join in the feast. They shout out "**Sir! Sir!... Open the door for us!**" (v11) But at that point it was too late. The opportunity had passed and there would not be a another chance.

B. The wise

1. Correct action—they went out to meet the bridegroom.

Turning to the wise, we see that they began the journey just like the others, they went out to meet the bridegroom. The crucial difference is the

sincerity of their actions as indicated by being prepared for the long haul. They brought with them extra oil in jars along with their lamps.²

2. Proper preparation—ready when the time came.

The verse I earlier read regarding Jesus being the light of every man coming into the world, from John 1, indicates that he gives some measure of light to *all* men. But that amount of light is not sufficient for salvation or sanctification. It is only to his elect that he gives so abundantly that they have enough in reserve. In fact he gives enough grace that we can be said to be furnished with all the riches of heaven, more than we can ask or think (Eph 3.20).

3. Joyful occasion—joined in the feast.

Having been endowed with this grace they endure to the end and are prepared to enter into the feast when the time comes. How wonderful it is when the time finally comes, and to be ready after a long wait!

V. Lessons

There are a number of lessons we can learn that I have touched on already.

A. Doers—serving him.

First, we must be obedient doers. Foolish virgins / hypocritical imposter christians do good works but they don't do them in faith. We must do those same works but do them in faith, and thereby please the Lord. Pagans and liberal churches out there do all sorts of good things: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for widows and orphans, take good care of their own bodily health. We must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. These are good and necessary, even commanded, actions.

We must do those same things, combined with faith, and thereby fully obey our master. Without faith we will join them in having the empty form

² At first reading it appears that the foolish ones brought empty lamps with no oil at all: "did not take any oil with them." (v3). However verse 8 makes it clear that they had started with some oil, they just didn't have any backup: "our lamps are going out". They could only go out if they were already lit, and to be already lit they must have had some oil to begin with. Hendricksen disagrees, taking the "any" of v3 to be absolute; he then reasons that the lamps were unlit the whole night but at the heralding of the bridegrooms arrival they hastened to light their damp wicks. Those of the foolish sputtered with no fuel supply.

of godliness and deny God's real power. With faith, living as unto the Lord and not to men, we will lay full claim to the power of God at work in us.

B. Faithful ministers—shining light.

The second lesson relates to the foundation, the core, of what we do. It is absolutely critical that we faithfully share the gospel. We don't have forever to do it. We can't hide our light under a bushel thinking there will be a later more conducive time. After the virgins woke up from their nap there wasn't the opportunity to share their light. Perhaps the wise virgins tried to warn the fools, just like Noah, being a preacher of righteousness, preached for years that the flood was coming.

I imagine the wise saying to the fools earlier in the evening, "Hey, you know, it's going to be a while till the bridegroom comes. Why don't you get some oil while you have the chance since there won't be another opportunity?"

But the fools ignored the advice and went their merry way...all the way to disappointment and destruction.

God has given us a tremendous gift: salvation. This gift can and should be multiplied in our lives by ministering in his name to our children, coworkers, neighbors across the street, whomever. There may not be another opportunity. We must help them get ready while there is still time.

C. Personally accountable—true light is non-transferable.

Third and finally, when it comes down to it we stand alone before God. We can't point to the teaching of a theologian and say "him! I agree with him." We can't point to our parents and say "them! I remember they mentioned something about repentance and faith." We can't point at God and say "if only you'd given me a chance."

Each of us is a condemned sinner. Each of God's children individually appropriates true holiness through faith in the Lord Jesus. That faith is not transferable; it doesn't automatically go to your children or your friends just as the wise virgins were not able to transfer it to the others. We must take heed to check our personal readiness and labor on while we wait.

Conclusion

When I was approaching the San Juan Mtns and woke up one morning to snow, I thought that was it. I thought to myself, if only I was a few days ahead I would have gotten through before the storms. I lamented the extra days off I'd taken over the previous months. It turned out that it was a very

short storm so I got a reprieve, but my initial hiking partners weren't so fortunate.

The truth is we don't know when that time will come. The disciples asked that question and all Jesus answered them was, "it's longer than you think, be ready for the long haul."

He was right, it has been a long time. Numerous heretical groups try to claim he has already come, and other false prophets try to predict when in the near future he will arrive. It is not for us to know the day or the hour; it is for us to live faithful lives, eagerly looking forward to the consummation. True joy comes in faithfully living each day and persevering through its trials (hiking through Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado in June, July, August, and early September) so that we are in a good place (New Mexico) when the storms come (in late September). We want others to be ready too.

May we be faithful preachers, and may God see fit to gather to us many, many companions to share our journey.

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