

**Be Ever Ready**  
The Parable of the Ten Virgins  
Matthew 25:1-13  
First Sunday in Advent  
November 30, 2014

**Introduction – Are You Ready?**

Before each of the thirteen times that I spoke last week in Eldoret, Kenya, I was always introduced by Bishop Chris Lusweti. He would ask the audience several times, “Are you ready?” And then he would have them applaud “to usher in the man of God.” While I am a little disappointed that such an introduction didn’t happen this morning, I do admit that it is perhaps just a bit “over-the-top” for us. But his question is a good one. “Are you ready?” When we ask that question, we are expecting something really exciting or important to happen.

Jesus asked a similar question of his disciples. “Will you be ready?” Will you be ready when he comes back? That is the question he poses in this, the last of our parables in our sermon series.

**Text – Matthew 25:1-13**

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 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.’ 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. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

### **Contextual and Historical Understanding**

If you will recall, Jesus taught in parables to enlighten those who “had ears to hear” and to confound those whose hearts were resistant. The parables found in the previous chapter of Matthew and in this chapter were told just to his twelve disciples in answer to the question that they posed in 24:3, “...when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming...?” Jesus is teaching about the end times and his second coming.

The ancient Middle Eastern wedding was different than our modern customs. The bride would prepare herself, along with her bridesmaids (virgins, in this story) at her house. They would then wait for the bridegroom to come and then they would all move in procession to his home where the formal ceremonies would commence. If the bridegroom came at night, which would not be unusual at all, the members of the party would carry torches to light their way. You can just imagine the sense of excitement with people processing down the street with torches ablaze. If you did not have a torch, you were not welcome and would be considered as a “party crasher.”

Our text says “lamps,” but the idea in the original language is that of rags soaked in oil and wrapped around a rather thick stick. If the lamp began to dim, it could be recharged by dipping it in more oil.

### **The Meaning of the Parable**

The purpose and the warning of the parable are obvious. Jesus says it himself in verse 13: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour [of my coming].” The meaning of parables is usually one simple message. We must resist the temptation of trying to read more into Jesus’ parables than what he intended. Nevertheless, there are some details in this parable that are of important note in fully grasping Jesus’ warning to his disciples and to us. Jesus’ parables often contained an element of surprise or shock. This one would have been unsettling to the disciples.

The story is simple enough and certainly could have happened. But the part that is out of the ordinary and shocking is the bridegroom’s refusal to let the foolish and tardy virgins into the celebration, saying, “Truly, I do not know you.” Most likely, the disciples would have expected

the bridegroom to open the door and say something like this, “O there you are, Elizabeth and Martha! I’ve been wondering where you were. I’m so glad you could make it!” Instead, the bridegroom closes the door on them and sends them away. Certainly, the shock of his refusal drove the point home to the disciples about the necessity of always being ready for Jesus’ return. In the parable, a delay in his coming is certainly implied. And now for us, two thousand years later, the implications are very sobering.

Who, then, are these unfortunate foolish virgins? That is the critical question for us this morning in understanding this parable. Certainly, no one who is listening to this message wants to have the door of heaven shut in their face with Jesus saying, “Truly, I do not know you.” I cannot think of a greater terror. I believe that the five foolish virgins represent people who go to church, do religious activities, say they are Christians, but, in reality, they are not. This parable resembles the one that Jesus told of the wheat and the weeds which grow together in the same field until the end of the age when they are harvested and then separated (Matt. 13:24-30). Jesus’ teaching about false believers in the midst of real believers should cause us to be very serious in dealing with this passage and the question that it poses to you and to me. We dare not take this parable lightly.

The five foolish virgins were never true believers in the first place because they never had any oil. Notice carefully in verse 3: the five wise virgins in this parable brought oil along to light their torches while the foolish ones brought no oil at all. The foolish virgins did not run out of oil; they never had it in the first place. They didn’t lose their salvation; they never were true believers in the first place. And yet they were invited to the wedding feast and acted as though they were part of the party along with the five wise virgins. This is consistent with other descriptions that Jesus made about the Kingdom of God, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14).

O how tragic to be one of the five foolish virgins! To think that you were a Christian with an eternal destiny in heaven only to be turned away at heaven’s gate is heartrending beyond description. The warning to make your salvation sure is a theme that runs throughout Jesus’

teaching. In Luke's gospel, someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" Jesus replied:

"Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!'"

Luke 13:24-27

The purpose of this text is not to create uncertainty in the hearts of believers. It is not to assault your assurance of salvation. Jesus is seeking to warn those, however, who have a false sense of assurance of their salvation. The Scriptures are very clear that the believer can and should know that they are God's child. First, we have the assurance of God's Word. Romans 10:9 says, "...if you confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Second, the constant changing in our life and behavior tells us that we are God's child. Conversion – salvation means that we are being constant changed into the image of Christ. Third, our hatred of sin tells us that we have crossed from darkness into light. Certainly, we will still sin from time to time, but we will not embrace that sin. We will despise and hate it. Finally, Romans 8:16 tells us, "his Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." We have what the old-timers called "the inner witness."

We have a problem in our modern churches, in that we have reduced being a Christian to saying a simple prayer. That is the starting place, but it cannot end there. For faith to be saving faith, it has to be lived out in a repentant – changed life that is becoming more and more like Christ. I would be unfaithful to the Word of God and my calling as a pastor if I did not allow the Scriptures to speak through this parable to ask you this morning, "Are you ready?" Are you ready for Jesus to return at any moment? Is your faith secure in your heart and in the four points I just shared with you? Do you know for sure that you are a Christian? You can be sure. You can be ready.

For two thousand years, the simple creed of the church has been, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again!" The New Testament epistles all urge believers to live in a state of readiness for Christ's return at any moment. John says, "And now, little children, abide in

him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming” (John 2:28). Are you abiding in Christ? Are you ready? The Apostle Paul, in his letter to Titus, urged the young pastor to teach his congregation to live holy lives:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our 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 lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Titus 2:11-14

“A people...who are zealous for good works.” Does that describe you? Then you are ready for his coming. You see, we are not saved by good works; we are saved for good works. Because we are saved, we do good works.

We have now embarked upon the season of Advent. Advent is much more than just preparation for Christmas Day. The season of Advent is a time to search our lives and realign them with God and his purposes. It is, as we will see next week, a season of repentance that brings real peace and real joy – rather than the manufactured kind that we find out in the world. This Sunday, as the First Sunday of Advent, we focus on the Second Coming of Christ. And as we do, through music and especially through this sobering parable, we reflect on the state of our lives and we begin the Advent journey together of realignment with God. The parable of the ten virgins forces us to consider our lives today in the present in light of the future promise of Christ’s return.