

March 17 – **2nd Sunday of Lent**

Matthew 25:1-13

“In or Out?”

Last week we went through the door of sin as we began our journey through the Doorways of the Cross. What I hoped to impress upon you was the serious nature of sin—not wrong actions, thoughts, attitudes and words, but how sin has tainted all of creation. Sin is a horrible blight, that recent events have clearly illustrated, from mass murder in Christchurch, to continued killings in Nigeria. Sin is such that one receives worldwide attention, while the other is basically ignored in mainstream media. You cannot look at our world and not realize that there is something terribly wrong. At the root of all that ails our planet, is sin.

Now, moms and dads are acutely aware that in raising children it is important to teach that actions have consequences. That message is clearly conveyed in throughout the Bible. Just as there is sin, there are consequences for sin, chief among them is judgment. We don't like to think about judgment. When we sing about God we prefer to use words such as love, grace, mercy, faithfulness. Every Sunday we sing lots of songs like that, but you would be hard pressed to many songs that celebrated God's judgment. However, He can not be a loving God without justice. Without justice, grace is reduced to license. There would be no need for a Saviour if there were no consequences for sin.

Our theme this morning ties in with our eleventh article of faith that states:

We believe in the immortality of the soul; in the resurrection of the body; in the general judgment at the end of the world; in the eternal happiness of the righteous; and in the eternal punishment of the wicked.

Sin has consequences. The parable we look at this morning is like many of the parables of Jesus. While we should be cautious with reading too much into these parables it is also true that Jesus was a master story teller, and his parables have layers of meaning. There is always a central lesson, but he reveals that lesson using word pictures that would be familiar to his audience, drawing in eternal truths color between the lines. Our story this morning is typical of that, but to understand the story we need to beware of the context and culture into which it was spoken.

Matthew tells us in the twenty-fourth chapter of his Gospel, “As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. The temple built by Herod was renowned for its beauty, and was a source of pride for the Jewish people. Jesus asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

The disciples were likely shocked by this statement. The Temple was a to them a symbol that God was in their midst, that God had not forgotten them. Herod had spared little expense in building this Temple, and indeed it was one of the most glorious structures in the ancient world. However, the Temple and all the activity around it

masked the real issue, man still had a problem with sin. The constantly rising smoke and aroma of meat burning over the fire should have been a reminder, but it wasn't. In fact, for many, this is the way things are and the way they will always be.

While sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, wanting to know more: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus, in response to the disciples, launches into what we now call the Olivet Discourse, during which Jesus lays out for them, in Matthew 24 and 25, the future, and for us the past, present and future. We also find this Discourse in Mark 13 and Luke 21. That each of the Synoptics record the Discourse surely implies its importance. Woven into the Discourse is some important threads for us to consider. First, we are told to be vigilant.

"Watch out that no one deceives you." (Mt 24:4)

"Therefore keep watch..." (Mt 24:42)

Mark is even more clear.

"You must be on your guard." (Mk 13:9, 23)

"Be on guard! Be alert!" (Mk 13:33)

"Keep watch..." (Mk 13:35)

"Watch!" (Mk 13:37)

We must be vigilant, watchful. God's people should not walk with blinders on, oblivious to the suffering and sinfulness of the world in which they live. However, to Jesus this is more than merely watching, it is a busy watching. Not only are we to be vigilant, we are also to be diligent. There are tasks to be done, there is work the faithful steward must be about.

⁴⁵ *"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?"* ⁴⁶ *It will be good for that servant whose master finds him **doing** so when he returns.*

Matthew 24:45-46

This is affirmed in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30) and in the illustration of the sheep and goats (Mt 25:31-46), where the watchful servant has fed, clothed and demonstrated hospitality to the stranger. This is to be a busy vigilance.

Lastly, we need to be intelligent. We are told again and again that no one knows when the return of Christ will be. Let me repeat that. No one knows when the return will be. Jesus repeats this often to drive that point home.

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mt 24:36)

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” (Mt 24:42.)

“The master...will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.” (Mt 24:50)

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Mt 25:13)

Jesus also points to the increase in deception and imitations. We need to be well versed in the Bible, and filled with the Spirit of Truth so as to avoid counterfeit religion. We need to be intelligent. Listen, yes there are signs and seasons we can recognize – but this has been true of every generation since Jesus ascended into heaven. We are not called to pinpoint a date, in fact, we are told the opposite. No one knows. To drive home that point Jesus even goes as far as to say “not even the angels, nor the Son” know. His concern, therefore is more that we are prepared for his return, that we are vigilant, diligent and intelligent. His expectation is neatly illustrated in the parable of the ten virgins. The parable opens with a phrase tying it to all that has already been said, “At that time...”^a

Here is what I want you to take away from this parable:

- **we each must be personally prepared for His return;**
- **we must be prepared for any length of time;**
- **we must be prepared to go to him directly.**¹

Or theme today is not a popular theme: judgement. I don't say this out of meanness; or harshness; or malice. I say this out of love. What we have believed and how we have lived and in whom we have trusted, matters. As we stand this morning at the doorway of judgement, I want you to leave this morning fully aware that there will come a time when you are **out** of time. Now is the day of your salvation, because you may not have tomorrow. And when judgement comes there will be no second chances, no do-overs, no participation trophy. The door of judgement will close and you will either be in, or you will be out. So, on what side of the door will you stand? The parable of Jesus hammers this message home, so I beg you to listen carefully to what Jesus tells us.

¹ “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise.^b ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

^a Matthew 24:10; 24:23; 24:30; 25:1

^b *Foolish* = Gk. *'moros'*: dull or stupid

To better understand this parable, it helps to understand the context and culture. To do that, throw out just about everything you know about weddings and enter into a first century Jewish village marriage celebration. You see, in the world of Jesus, a wedding was not about the bride. Yes, she was important to the day, and yes, she would be beautifully adorned, but she was not the focus of the day. Instead, it was all about the bridegroom. The wedding day was to be the best day of his life, and the first week the best week of his life. After the wedding ceremony it was customary for everyone to address him as a prince, and the bride as a princess. We'll dispense with much of the preliminary stuff and go right to the wedding day.

Jesus begins by noting that ten virgins go out to meet the bridegroom, five of them are foolish (the word Jesus uses has as its root the word from which we get the English *moron*—and five of them are wise. Five were wise, five were stupid). He is describing the practice of the day wherein the groom and his party would be escorted to the home of the bride, the escort being a group of ten virgins who would carry lamps mounted on long wooden poles. In those days there were no street lights, so in effect, that is a part of the escort role, to help light the way so that the bridegroom would be visible, and so the groom could see the joyous faces of his neighbors as they celebrated his marriage.

One of the customs that heightened the anticipation of the big moment was that the bridegroom would deliberately tarry—he would be fashionably late. Typically, the bridegroom would live in the same village, but Jesus describes a groom that appears to be coming from some distance, and this groom is more than fashionably late. It is long past the hour of darkness. In that day bridegrooms took a certain pleasure in catching the bride off guard, with even more pleasure if asleep. The audience Jesus spoke to would be smiling at the thought of these virgins and the bride becoming more and more drowsy and then nodding off.

⁶ “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

⁷ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ “‘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.’

Ahead of the bridegroom would be one of his party who would announce the arrival of the groom. And so, at midnight, when the whole village was asleep and everyone was comfortably snuggled in for the night, the cry rang out – “Here comes the groom!” It is almost comical to picture the suddenly roused virgins scrambling to get their lamps lit. Its not very likely that the lamps would have been burning all this time, for the bride’s home would have been spruced up for the occasion with festive lighting already present. Suddenly awakened, the ten virgins head out the door with their now lighted lamps when the foolish ones realize they have neglected to get enough oil. Already their lamps a laboring. Not only did they not bring extra oil, they started out with not enough oil.

A wedding was a great occasion in a Jewish village. People would already be gathering outdoors to catch a glimpse of the bridegroom. The foolish virgins begin to beg the wise virgins for some of their oil, but there is a problem. Typically, the groom would not travel by the most direct route to either the bride's home, or back to his own home where the ceremony would take place. Instead they would take a roundabout way, providing opportunity for the whole village to greet and bless the happy couple. This was a problem—for the foolish virgins—for already their lamps were flickering.

So, what has happened. Well first of all, the foolish virgins appeared to have done very little preparation. They should have brought more oil for their lamps, and would likely have had opportunity at the bride's house to at least top up their lamps. But they failed to do so. Right from the get-go they were woefully unprepared. The wise virgins though had done the opposite. Not only were their lamps topped up with oil, they had even taken the time to bring along jars with more oil. The foolish virgins are instructed to go to those who sell oil and buy their own supply. However, Jesus audience would be aware that this was a fool's errand. At this hour of the night there would be no opportunity to get oil. They would already be wondering about the outcome for the foolish virgins.

¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ ¹² “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ ¹³ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

The parable comes to a very quick and sudden conclusion. This only heightens the lesson Jesus wants to convey. The delay in the arrival of the groom has caught everyone off guard, in fact, his delay has led many to fall asleep. It has also given anyone who should have chosen to do so, time to prepare for his eventual arrival. As the foolish virgins scamper off to find oil the groom arrives at the home of the bride and whisks her back to his home where on the roof is the *‘bet hatanut’*—the wedding chamber the groom has prepared beforehand to accommodate the newlyweds for their wedding week.² Did you catch that? The groom has prepared a place for his bride. It is now time for the wedding feast to begin, and the door of the home is closed.

I'm not sure why the NIV translates the call of the foolish virgins as, “Sir! Sir!”. Most of the major translations render it “Lord! Lord!”^c It is quite obvious that Jesus has lifted the parable out of its village setting and reframed to the end of the age. The stupid virgins, who may or may not have found oil (although the audience would know they had none), find the door closed. They have been excluded, locked out, on the outside of the celebration taking place. Though they cry, “Lord, Lord”, as do those in Matthew 7:21, where Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven,” He solemnly replies, “I don’t know you.” The stupid virgins find themselves standing on the outside of the door.

^c NET, NASB, ESV, NLT, BBE, NKJV, NRSV, KJV

Seriously, this simple statement should scare the hell out of us. The message of Jesus could not be stated any clearer. And it is not just here, but all the way through all of the Bible is the message that sin will be judged, that this judgement is final, and at that time you will either be in or you will be out. Any preaching or teaching that does not affirm this fact so clearly stated by Jesus himself, is of the devil. It is a lie.

Let's go back to my intent this morning.

- **First, we each must be personally prepared for His return;**
- **we must be prepared for any length of time;**
- **we must be prepared to go to him directly.**

The foolish virgins thought they could get by on the supply of others, that some one else would be able to provide for them. Listen, you must be personally prepared. You need to do the work, that is, read the Bible for yourself—just listening to a sermon once a week or every couple of weeks will not suffice. I pray my words inspire you, challenge you, shake you up if necessary – but my words cannot provide oil for your lamp. That is your personal responsibility. You are responsible for your own oil. You need to have personal time with God in meditation, in prayer, in reading Scripture. I can't do that for you and neither can your wife, your husband, your friends, your parents, your siblings. You must personally prepare for his return.

Secondly, you need to be prepared for the long haul. Jesus said in verse 13, *“he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”* We've heard the same message in Revelation 3:26, *“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations...”*, and in Matthew 10:20, *“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”* You may have received Christ into your heart as a child, but how have you experienced him lately? What are you doing now to keep your relationship with Him fresh and current? As Christ has tarried have you allowed yourself to drift off into other concerns and habits that have consumed your energy, spending your oil on that which is only temporary? Do you spend more time planning your vacation than you do on preparing for eternity?

Lastly, we must be prepared to go to Him directly. When the trumpet of the Lord sounds there will not be time to get oil and get prepared. Today is the day of your salvation. We often hear people use the words of Jesus in arguments for a rapture, but the context of the verses is not one of escape, rather, it is one of how quickly we will all be snatched up into the air and it will be over. Get rid of the thinking that, well, when the rapture takes place then I'll know the Bible is true and then I'll get serious with God. Nope. Too late. You'll find yourself alone in bed; you'll find yourself working a two man saw alone; you'll find that instead of buying oil you bought a line.

So, the question of the day really is – are you ready? God is a God of love, yes. But God is also just.

“...do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation

2 Peter 3:8-15

Are you using the time you have been given right now to make preparations for eternity? Something we may miss from Jesus parable is that when the groom arrives time will be no more. We must be ready to go to the place prepared for us immediately upon His arrival. It will not be like an exam we can cram for at the last minute – no, we must be ready immediately. It's not that we can make a mad dash to rush through traffic to get there on time – no, it will be immediate. If we are not ready to go to Him directly, all we will find is a closed door. Judgement will have been made. And the Lord does not know you.

Jeremiah gave us the poignant thought: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved,” (Jeremiah 8:20) that has been put into a song format.

When the harvest is past
And the Summer is gone,
And meetings and prayers shall be o'er
When the beams cease to break
Of the blest Sabbath morn
And Jesus invites thee no more

When the harvest is past
And the summer is o'er
With the wheat or the tares
When the judgement appears
Oh, which shall it be evermore

Right now, here in this place at this time, the doorway to the cross of Jesus stands open. It is not too late to take your place in the banquet hall. What are you waiting for? What is holding you back? Why delay? At some time, unknown to you or to me, the door will close. And at that time you will either be in, or you will be out. So, are you in, or out? Which shall it be evermore?

Endnotes

¹ Edersheim, 453.

² John J. Collins in Families in Ancient Israel, 106.