The Ten Bridesmaids

(Matthew 25:1-13)

If you have trouble appreciating this parable in which everybody behaves badly toward everybody else you're not alone. The interaction between the two groups of bridesmaids reads like a scene from a first-century production of *Mean Girls.* The bridesmaids labeled "*foolish*" arrive ill-prepared for their appointed role. They exhibit a kind of clueless entitlement in their expectation that others should bail them out. And at the exact moment they're needed the most, they go shopping.

Those labeled "*wise*" confound matters. They're the ones to suggest this fool's errand, which is preposterous on several practical levels. What dealer of oil would be open for business at midnight? And who would ever send unaccompanied bridesmaids out, unchaperoned with a wad of cash at such an hour? Did no one think of doubling up on their lamps? Did no one offer? An undercurrent of misogyny is hard

to ignore in this portrayal of bickering women pitted against one another to out-maneuver the competition for a man's attention and favor.

The bridegroom behaves equally poorly. Why is he so late? Think of the other guests—the cooks, servants, and musicians—not to mention the bride! After keeping everyone waiting and guessing into the wee hours, what entitles this groom to punish the women for being a little tardy themselves? Even the stated moral of the parable causes frustration. The admonition to "keep awake" ought to condemn all ten drowsy bridesmaids, but only five have the door slammed in their faces.

What we consider Christian conduct is nowhere on display in this parable. Perhaps that's the point. In a world booby-trapped with opportunities to behave badly, we must beware! Keep awake! Pay attention?

The fact that time does not stand still, that all of life is moving toward a climax, a consummation, is nowhere

more clearly illustrated than in Jesus' parable of the ten bridesmaids. In this parable, the sense of urgency is evident. Everything hinges on preparation—preparation before a great event takes place.

In this instance, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding, specifically the elaborate procedure in a Jewish wedding. A Jewish marriage had three stages: the engagement, the betrothal, and the marriage itself. This parable is set during the third state of marriage, when the bridegroom goes to the house of the bride to bring her in marriage to his own home. It is this event that takes place in the parable, and the ten virgins are friends who have joined the celebration.

It was customary for girls to keep the bride company as she waited for the bridegroom and to celebrate by dancing along the road with their lamps or torches. In this story of Jesus, the ten virgins are of two types: five were wise and brought lamps and oil for the lamps; five were foolish and brought their lamps but were

without oil. From all outward appearances the ten young women were alike. When the story is over, however, we discover that five of them were really imposters. They had not been serious about attending the bride and waiting for the bridegroom. Let's examine the hoax more closely.

In verses 1 to 5, we discover the *cover-up*. Here we see the tactics used by these five foolish young women, who, for whatever reasons wanted to participate in the wedding without making the proper preparation.

All of these ten young women looked alike. Each had a lamp, each was dressed in such a way that her attire would pass for that of one who was part of an Eastern wedding party. Each claimed to have been invited to be a participant.

To be a part of such a wedding party was an honor indeed. Why? When the bridegroom came, these young women would be in the social limelight for at

least a week. Note the expertise of the foolish young women's devious plan. The imitation was perfect; they had dressed themselves like the true bridesmaids and had trimmed their lamps like the others. After a while, when everyone grew weary, they lay down to sleep just like the five wise young women did. What a deceptive sight they made! No one could tell them apart.

There are many ways in which persons can hide their unpleasant souls and appear to be devoted believers in Christ. The simplest and most popular

way to do this is through local church membership. Some do not join a church to declare their personal faith in Christ and to be in an atmosphere when they can grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, some join for social reasons, for business reasons, or to gain a sense of security or belonging.

The second part of this parable is in verses 6 to 9, and is labeled as the *exposure*. The moment of truth had come when the five foolish young women could no

longer keep up their false appearance. Suddenly, without warning, their cover-up was exposed; they could no longer maintain their deception. The bridegroom came at midnight, and the wise bridesmaids, who were ready for him, calmly trimmed their lamps, which burned brightly.

The foolish virgins looked at their lamps, and they could pretend no longer. They knew they had no oil.

Frantically, they cried out to the wise young women, “Give us some of your oil!” But they replied, “No! Go and buy some for yourselves!” While the foolish ones rushed madly to purchase oil for their lamps and thereby prepare to the feast, the door was shut.

The remarkable aspect of this parable is the ease with which, almost up to the end, the foolish young women were able to keep the appearance of being thoroughly prepared and genuine as invited bridesmaids. Some borrowed clothes and a little clever acting and everyone seemed convinced—even the other

bridesmaids. The folly of pretense is that every time one is successful in effecting a ploy, her confidence increases. Soon she is sure that nothing can keep her from fooling everybody—even God.

The third and final part of this parable is labeled as the *dismissal.* This is the tragic, horrible moment when the bridegroom revealed to the five foolish

virgins their true state. At this point, the women scurried desperately for oil. But it was too late. Their lamps we dry.

The great crisis that will reveal all false imitation in the midst of the church and society is the coming of Jesus Christ. That day will be a day of revelation. How will you stand when that day comes? The Christian will always pray the prayer of the psalmist: “Seach me. O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23-24).

The picture Jesus paints in this parable is that there may come a time when it is impossible for people to repent. In the two descriptions of the day of judgment in the New Testament, it is clear that the judged have no recourse to last-minute pleadings or sudden changing of mind. Jesus speaks here of a

door that closes, separating the true from the false and separating them forever.

We must face the fact that one day it might indeed be too late to do what we might have done to find eternal salvation. I have heard some people say in all sincerity, “Well, it’s never too late to repent and to mend one’s ways!” Jesus says here, very plainly, that one day it will be too late to do so!

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

So, what are the **lessons** we can learn from this Scripture reading in Matthew?

This parable of the ten bridesmaids teaches us the necessity of being prepared for the unexpected return of Christ. This parable also teaches the importance of individual faith and preparation rather than relying on others. The shutting out of the foolish virgins illustrates that neglecting spiritual

duties can lead to dire consequences. And this parable serves as a reminder to live out one's faith and share the message of salvation, reflecting the urgency of being ready for Christ's return.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, give us a heart of expectation as we wait for the glorious return of your Son and our Savior. Forgive us our impatience, our lack of vigilance, and especially for our times of passionless discipleship. Keep us aware, awake, and attentive to our behavior now and in every moment. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**