

The Parables of Jesus

Week 8: Readiness -- Matthew 25:1–13

A wedding is coming, and in Jesus' day a wedding was the event of the season. The custom was unhurried and joyful: the groom would come for his bride, often after dark, and a party of young women would be waiting to meet him with lamps lit, to escort the wedding procession to the feast. So Jesus sets the scene. Ten of these young women take their lamps and go out to wait for the bridegroom. From the outside, all ten look exactly the same. Same role, same lamps, same invitation, same place in line. You could not tell them apart. But Jesus says five of them were wise and five were foolish, and the difference, invisible at first, is about to become the most important thing in the world.

Here is the difference. The wise ones, along with their lamps, brought extra flasks of oil. The foolish ones brought their lamps but no reserve, no thought for what they would do if the wait stretched long. And the wait does stretch long. "As the bridegroom was delayed," Jesus says, all ten of them grew drowsy and fell asleep. Notice that all ten slept; the wise are not faulted for resting. The difference was never about staying awake. It was about being prepared for a delay no one could predict.

Then, at midnight, the cry rings out: "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Ten women scramble awake and reach for their lamps. The wise trim theirs and the flames burn bright. But the foolish look down in horror, their wicks guttering, the oil nearly gone. "Give us some of your oil," they beg, "for our lamps are going out." And the wise give an answer that sounds harsh until you understand it: "Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." It is not selfishness. It is simply that some things cannot be shared at the last minute. The foolish run off into the night to find an open shop.

And while they are gone, the bridegroom arrives. Those who were ready go in with him to the marriage feast, and the door is shut. Later the others come back, pounding on it: "Lord, lord, open to us." But the answer that comes through the door is the most chilling sentence in the parable: "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." Then Jesus lands the whole story with a single command: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Read this parable slowly. It is about a wedding, and a delay, and a door that shut, and it asks one searching question of every one of us who claims to be waiting for the Lord: when He comes, will you be ready?

Group Discussion: All ten young women looked the same, carried lamps, and waited for the same bridegroom; the difference between them was hidden until the moment he arrived. Why do you think Jesus warns that genuine readiness for His return can look, from the outside, exactly like an unprepared faith, and what does that say about the difference between appearing ready and actually being ready?

Personal Reflection: The foolish virgins were not wicked or hostile; they simply assumed the wait would be short and never prepared for a long one. Where in your own life have you been coasting spiritually, quietly assuming there is plenty of time before you need to get serious about your walk with Christ? What would it mean to start preparing now?

Read Matthew 25:1–13

Study Questions

1. Jesus tells this parable to teach about the coming of the bridegroom, ending with, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (v. 13). What does the parable teach us about the certainty of Christ’s return and about the fact that its timing is deliberately hidden from us, and why does He join those two truths together?
2. The foolish virgins assumed they had time to spare and were caught unprepared. Be honest about your own heart: are you living each day truly ready for the Lord’s return, or quietly assuming it is far enough off that you can attend to it later? Where is that assumption showing up in how you live?
3. Jesus says, “the bridegroom was delayed,” and during that delay all ten fell asleep (v. 5). What does this teach us about the interval between Christ’s first coming and His return, and about the spiritual danger of growing lax and drowsy precisely because He has not yet come?
4. It has now been many centuries since Jesus promised to return, and the delay can quietly dull our urgency. How has the long wait for Christ’s coming affected your own readiness? Where have you grown spiritually drowsy, assuming that what has not happened yet will not happen soon?
5. When the cry came, the foolish could not borrow oil from the wise; each had to have her own (vv. 8–9). What does the oil that cannot be shared teach us about the deeply personal nature of genuine readiness for Christ, the preparation that no one else can do on our behalf?
6. Some things in the Christian life simply cannot be borrowed at the last minute, a real relationship with Christ, a faith that is truly your own, a life of ongoing obedience. What is the “oil” you cannot borrow from anyone else, and how full is your own flask right now?
7. When the unprepared finally came, the door was shut, and the bridegroom said, “I do not know you” (vv. 10–12). What does this sobering scene teach about the finality of judgment when Christ returns, and about the tragedy of a discipleship that looks the part yet is not truly known by the Lord?
8. The foolish virgins were part of the wedding party, carried lamps, and fully expected to enter; their faith was real enough on the surface but unprepared underneath. Is your faith genuinely your own and well-supplied, or are you in some way coasting on the faith of your family, your upbringing, or your church? What would it take to make it truly yours?
9. This parable calls us to watch for Christ’s return, which the New Testament presents as one certain, visible, glorious event when the reigning Lord comes to judge and to gather His

people (Acts 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). How does this guard us against the popular ideas of a secret rapture, a two-stage return, or a future earthly thousand-year reign, and how does knowing that Christ reigns now and will return once to judge shape the way we wait and watch?

10. Look back across the parable. Jesus held up two groups who looked identical until the bridegroom came, and He pressed one question: are you ready? Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this story. What is the single step you most need to take this week to be found ready whenever the Lord returns?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 24:36–44, that no one knows the day or hour, so we must stay ready, for the Son of Man comes at an hour we do not expect; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11, the day of the Lord coming like a thief, and the call for children of light to stay awake and sober; 2 Peter 3:8–14, the reason for the apparent delay and the call to be found ready and at peace when the day comes; Acts 1:9–11, the promise that this same Jesus will come in the same way the apostles saw Him go; Titus 2:11–14, living self-controlled and godly lives as we await our blessed hope, the appearing of our great God and Savior.