

Scripture for Nov 1st 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (NIV)

5 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Matthew 25:1-12 (NIV)

25 "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. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, 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. 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.' 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. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' ¹² "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'

Sermon: “Be Prepared”

While at Boarding School in Nigeria, our dorm parents wanted to instill self-discipline and to teach some useful skills to us boys within their care. And so they taught us how to light fires, tie knots, do semaphore, and perform first aid. Looking back, they were remarkably trusting because we used to go on hikes into the surrounding hills to explore, ford streams, and find amethysts, quartz, and the like. I recall two basic rules: (a) we had to tell the dorm parents *where* we planned to go, and (b) the minimum group size was three. In that way, if someone got injured, one could stay with them and the other one return to get help. Basically, they were teaching us to always “*Be Prepared*,” and you will recognise that is the motto of the Scouts.

“Be Prepared” is an appropriate title for today’s parable too. Before we look at it, let’s consider the context. In Matthew 24, Jesus has been giving words of encouragement and warning, using popular apocalyptic language that can seem very strange – even scary - to us. The disciples ask Jesus, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”¹ Jesus says there will be increasing religious and military turmoil, along with natural disasters,² together with hostility towards his followers, and division within them.³ Jesus then states that there will be much suffering in the world, and he warns against false teachings and false messiahs. Nevertheless, in this speech Jesus says four reassuring things:

- 1) “The one who stands firm to the end will be saved, and this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the *whole* world as a witness to *all nations* - and then the end will come.”⁴
- 2) When Jesus, the Son of Man, comes it will be unmistakable - you won’t miss it.⁵
- 3) No one knows *when* that will happen, only God – not even the angels *or Jesus* knows.⁶ That means we’re *not* to waste time speculating about it!
- 4) Jesus adds: “Be *prepared* because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”⁷

In fact, an analogy is made that his coming will be as unexpected as “a thief in the night,” and we also heard that in the writing of Paul in our other reading this morning.⁸ Jesus then follows up with a parable in which Jesus returned *sooner* than expected and finds his servant living it up and squandering

¹ Matt 24:3b. Note “coming” in Greek is “*parousia*,” and denotes the arrival of a conquering leader coming into the city. See also Mark 13.

² Matt 24:4-8.

³ Matt 24:9-14.

⁴ Matt 24:13-14. Another word for “saved” is “delivered.”

⁵ Matt 24:30.

⁶ Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32.

⁷ Matt 24:44, 50. In v42 we are told to be “watchful.” See also Luke 12:40; Mark 13:33.

⁸ Matt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:2,4. (See also Luke 12:39; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3, 16:15.) Note that 1 Thessalonians was written by Paul in the early 50s AD, whereas Matthew was written some 30 years later, *after* the destruction of Jerusalem. This “thief” image was either borrowed from Paul or was part of an oral tradition of the words of Jesus in wide circulation. I suggest the latter, as 1 Thess 5:2 implies that Paul is stating something his readers *already* knew.

opportunities.⁹ This is followed by a second parable in which Jesus comes *later* than expected – the parable of the ten virgins, or bridesmaids.¹⁰ This message of “Be Prepared” therefore applies to both. Let’s explore the story.

Jesus speaks in the *future* tense: “At *that* time the kingdom of heaven *will* be like . . .”¹¹ and then he compares that occasion to a wedding celebration. You may recall that Matthew earlier presents the Parable of the Wedding Banquet¹² for the son of the King, so the bridegroom here also corresponds to Jesus.¹³ This parable, therefore, has strong allegorical links. The 10 bridesmaids or virgins represent the Christians that are waiting for the bridegroom to come.¹⁴ The bridegroom’s delay alludes to the fact that Jesus has not returned as soon as many had hoped. The marriage feast itself symbolizes the joyful life in the age to come, and the closed-door stands for the last judgment. This story, together with others in this Sermon on the Mount of Olives, serves as instruction as to *how* we are live right *now*, in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It seems that some in Matthew’s community are weary of waiting for Jesus to come, not least because at that point in time, Jerusalem has been destroyed.

Think of a wedding – any wedding! Traditions obviously vary in different cultures. They will naturally involve food, drink, music, dancing, and a large number of guests. In those days, only when everything was finally ready – and there could always be last-minute hitches to resolve – would the groom collect the bride from her father’s house and then parade her to cheering crowds along a public, circuitous route to his family house. And it was not unknown for this to be an evening procession illuminated by lamps. But it *is* unusual for the groom to be this late, arriving only at midnight.¹⁵

Let’s go back to the 10 bridesmaids; they were all dressed in appropriate wedding garments and they each had lamps. Matthew tells us at the outset that, although you *couldn’t* tell from their appearance, “five were foolish and five were wise.”¹⁶ Matthew then tells us why; the foolish ones were unprepared for a long delay and they didn’t bring *enough* oil with them.¹⁷ Now the groom’s party were longer than expected and all ten bridesmaids fell asleep only to be awakened¹⁸ by the good news: “Here’s the

⁹ See Matt 24:45-51

¹⁰ Matt 25:1-13. The chapter break is unhelpful here; this discourse - the “Sermon on the Mount of Olives” - runs from Matt 24:1-25:46. See also Luke 12:35-48; 13: 25–28.

¹¹ Matt 25:1. This is in contrast to Jesus’ typical “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .”

¹² Matt 22: 1-14; see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Live-a-Life-Worthy-of-Gods-Grace.pdf> .

¹³ The language of Matt 25:11-12 implies that the groom is Jesus. He is called “Lord” and “Truly I tell you” echoes a familiar saying of Jesus, see Matt 5:18, 18:13. (The title “Lord” has multiple meanings!)

¹⁴ See also Matt 9:15. The bride is *not* explicitly mentioned here! The image of YHWH as the bridegroom and Israel as the bride was prevalent in the Old Testament and in the Jewish tradition (see Isa 54:1–8; Jer 31:32; Hos 2:1–20). It is continued in the Christian community with the bridegroom representing Christ and the Church as the bride. This is implied in 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-32; Rev 19:7,9; 21:2,9, and explicit in John 3:29, but this is *not* a feature of Matthew’s analogy.

¹⁵ Matt 25:6.

¹⁶ Matt 25:2. This has resonances in Jewish wisdom literature to “Lady Wisdom and Mistress Folly,” Prov 9:1-6, 13-18.

¹⁷ In Matt 25:3-4 could give the impression they brought *no* oil with them. Yet in v8b, we are told their lamps were “going out.” (We must not over-analyze this parable because it contains significant allegorical elements.)

¹⁸ One *shouldn’t* think about the sleeping and rising as alluding to death and resurrection! Both groups sleep.

bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”¹⁹ They promptly check and trim their lamps only for the 5 foolish bridesmaids to discover they are running out of oil. That’s a disaster! They beg the other 5 wise bridesmaids to share their oil, and perhaps to *our* surprise, they say “No, because then *we* won’t have enough.”²⁰ Why they go off at midnight expecting to find an open corner-store beats me!²¹ But they miss *the* big moment, the bridegroom arrives and the door to the party is shut.²² The sensible bridesmaids were prepared and enter the wedding party, the silly bridesmaids eventually come back and shout: “Lord, Lord - open the door for us!! And Jesus replies “Truly I tell you - I don’t know you.”²³

It is a disturbing picture, what does it mean? Since the ten bridesmaids represent the Church, the story implies not all will enter the celebration party. This may surprise us. Another source of confusion in understanding the Parable is the meaning of the *oil*! Why didn’t the 5 wise ones share their oil? It seems that, from an allegorical point of view, the oil was something that *couldn’t* be shared. To try and make sense of this we have to go back to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, *but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*” Jesus goes on: “Many will say to me *on that day*, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”²⁴ First, the connection is obvious because of the echoes of “*Lord, Lord*” and the words “*I never knew you.*”²⁵ Second, the oil seems to be linked to “doing the will of the Father.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus then goes on to talk about the *wise* and *foolish* builders, those who built on rock and on sand.²⁶ And the difference between them is that the “foolish person was someone who heard the words of Jesus and *didn’t* put them into practice.”²⁷ As you might imagine, Martin Luther, didn’t like the sound of that and claimed the oil meant “faith”!²⁸ However, to be fair to Matthew, *actions* and *authenticity* seems more appropriate.²⁹

In this parable, the key point is that the 5 wise bridesmaids were *prepared*, even to endure a *long* delay before the groom’s arrival.³⁰ Thus when their faith in the bridegroom’s return is tested, they have the

¹⁹ Matt 25:6.

²⁰ Matt 25:9.

²¹ Scholars therefore say this detail is somewhat contrived and again points to focusing on the overall allegorical meaning,

²² Matt 25:10. The closing of the door points out the illusion of endless opportunity.

²³ Matt 25:11-12.

²⁴ Matt 7:21-23. See also 7:15-20 which speaks about bearing *good fruit*. Not to forget 22:11–14!

²⁵ The implication here is that Jesus has been given divine authority to judge. See also John 5:22,27; Matt 16:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1,8.

²⁶ Matt 7:24-27.

²⁷ Matt 7:26. See also Matt 5:16.

²⁸ Actually, if you go through the whole of Matthew’s gospel, you will see the oil could stand for many virtues or character traits. It could also include the abstinence bad behavior – 15:19; love for enemies – 5:44; love of other Christians – 24:12; forgiveness of others - 18:21–35; unhesitating faith - 21:21; loyalty to Jesus – 10:32; and love for God - 22:37.

²⁹ See Matt 5:15-16; 25:31–46.

³⁰ In Matt 25:13, the instruction is to “be watchful.” Yet both went to sleep! Being *prepared* is the key issue here. (In this verse, Matthew is thought to be returning to Mark 13:32-37.)

resources available to sustain them. Are we prepared? Are we persevering? Are we excited about the coming of the Son of Man?

Many are uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus is also the divinely-appointed judge at the end of time. That is not a popular image and it is one that the Church has abused in the past – even the present. I certainly don't want to perpetuate that. This theme of Jesus as judge is simply one that occurs at this time in the Christian calendar. And if I failed to mention it, it would be irresponsible and negligent of me as a minister. Apocalyptic language can express things negatively or fearfully. Therefore, hear Paul's pastoral words of encouragement to Christians who are waiting impatiently for Jesus to come:

"You, my dear family, are *not* in darkness. That day won't surprise you like a robber. You are all children of light, children of the day! We don't belong to the night, or to darkness. . . We daytime people should be self-controlled, clothing ourselves with the breastplate of faith and love, and with the helmet of the hope of salvation; because God has not placed us on the road to fury, but to gaining salvation, through our Lord Jesus the Messiah. He died for us, so that . . . we should live together with him. So strengthen one another, and build each other up, just as you are doing."³¹

In conclusion, through this parable Matthew sets forth the assurance that Jesus, the Son of Man, *will* return in glory to fully-realize God's reign that Jesus began. It also exhorts Christians as to the appropriate stance that we should take living in the present. Two extremes are to be avoided. On the one hand we must *not* be lulled into thinking that there is no sense of urgency in preparing for the Lord's coming. It's foolish to put off obtaining the oil of authentic deeds of discipleship. On the other hand, the prospect of the end should not be something that produces panic or anxiety. Even the wise maidens were able to go to sleep. We are called to live in hope and with expectation. Therefore, have peace of mind, but *be prepared*. Amen.

³¹ 1 Thess 5:4-11 NTE, adapted.