

The King and the Kingdom Part 9

We continue our series looking at the nature of the kingdom as described by Jesus in what we call his kingdom parables. These are the stories Jesus told that begin with “The kingdom of heaven is like...” Turn to Matthew 25 as we take a look at the parable of the ten bridesmaids or what some call the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

Jesus has been talking about signs of the end of time in the previous chapter. He tells his disciples, **“Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Matthew 24:42-44**

Jesus then asked a question. “Who then is the faithful and wise servant?” He tells them the faithful and wise servant is the one whom the master finds doing what he told them to do when he returns. It’s in this context Jesus tells this parable.

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out; ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ ‘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.’ 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. Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” Matthew 25:1-13

Once again we have a story with multiple layers and various ways to look at it. Let me give you a little background on the wedding itself because this isn’t your American-style wedding. Weddings were typically held in the evening and often at night after a day of dancing and celebrating. The virgins in the story are bridesmaids to the bride. They are referred to as

virgins to show they are young and not yet married. They have spent the day with the bride. The groom has spent the day and evening with his friends, dancing and celebrating as well. The bride lives in her father's house and the groom has prepared a place for them as a married couple in his father's house. After everything is prepared, he goes to get his bride at her father's house. His groomsmen come with him. The bridesmaids should have been watching for his arrival. The word translated as lamps most likely referred to torches, oil soaked rags on a stick. The bridesmaids leave the bride to go out with their torches to light the way for the bridegroom as he comes to collect his bride. They all go in a joyful procession back to the groom's house where under the wedding canopy the vows are spoken and the groom carries the bride into his home and the wedding feast begins, lasting seven days after the ceremony. It's a big deal. Just like today, it was an honor to be asked to be a bridesmaid and it would be every young lady's nightmare to dream of being unprepared and asleep and missing out on the wedding banquet and the moment when the groom carries his bride across the threshold and into their home.

As I said, Jesus tells the story in the context of this discussion about his return and end time events. Jesus then says "at that time the kingdom of heaven will be like." One point of the parable has to do with watchfulness and faithfulness in the "in-between time." What do I mean by that? We have said that the kingdom of heaven is both "now and not yet." It is here among us, and yet we are waiting for the fullness of his kingdom to be manifested. We are saved and yet we live in a world that is still full of sin, battling against us. His kingdom is a kingdom of healing power and people are healed and yet God's people still die from sickness and illness. His kingdom is here among us now, but it is yet to come in its fullness and completeness.

In the parable, the wedding party is living in the in between period, just like the kingdom of heaven among us. The wedding party was living in the period between the betrothal (the engagement) which was a legally recognized agreement and the wedding and final uniting of the bride and groom. The fathers had negotiated the betrothal, the marriage arrangement and dowry. It was legal, but it was not yet completed, not yet consummated. The bride still lived in her father's house and was awaiting that moment when the groom came to take her as his bride to his house. So they were between the engagement and the wedding. In between time.

The church lives in the in between time. We are engaged to Jesus. He is the heavenly bridegroom. He is preparing a place for us in his father's house and we are waiting for him to

come and take us home and the consummation of all things. We are to be waiting and watching, expectantly, like the bride and the bridesmaids, for the coming of the bridegroom.

Paul writes, **“I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.” 2 Corinthians 11:2** We have been promised to Jesus and we are waiting for his return. But we are living in the in between time and the tendency is to become sleepy, complacent while we wait. We are to remain pure, holy, committed to him alone (keeping ourselves as pure virgins, no other lovers), watching for his return. But as he delays his coming, we become less watchful. “He didn’t come yesterday or the day before. Maybe he’s just not coming.” The torch goes out while we wait unless we keep supplying oil. It’s dark, there is no sign of the groom and we just nod off to sleep. That’s what’s happening in the parable. Notice a few things for us to consider.

Five wise and five foolish virgins. All of them had torches and apparently had some oil to begin with because all of their lamps or torches were burning at the start. “Give us some of your oil, our lamps are going out.” The bible says all of them became drowsy and fell asleep. No one condemns them for falling asleep, but obviously it would have been better if they had all been awake and watchful. But what made some foolish and some wise?

The foolish ones were unprepared. They had no extra oil even though it was expected the bridegroom would delay his coming. It was tradition. You could expect the grooms’ arrival to be unexpected! The oil-soaked rags of the torch would be expected to burn for maybe 15-20 minutes. They had to have known they would need a container of extra oil to be able to relight the torch and accompany the wedding party. They failed to prepare.

What’s the plan? Lamps go out without oil. Fire goes out without fuel. Spiritual life and vitality diminishes without effort to fuel the fire! It won’t just happen without your effort. You have to keep the oil supplied and fire burning. How? By what we call spiritual disciplines: reading God’s word, prayer, worship, meeting together with other followers of Christ, repentance, keeping your heart and life surrendered to Jesus and his will and purpose for you and your life.

What’s your plan? Have you made provision for how you are going to maintain your spiritual walk with God? How do you plan to maintain your spiritual fire and fervor? The fire will go out if you don’t keep it fueled and burning. The foolish didn’t have a plan. They hadn’t

prepared. By contrast, the wise were ready! They had extra oil. They knew the groom might not come for some time, so they had extra oil to make sure the torch would remain lit.

Faithfulness and watchfulness. Prepared for the long haul. Those seven churches in Revelation that we studied a few months ago, they heard it repeatedly, “to those who overcome.” Stay awake and alert and remain faithful, determined to overcome by his grace. Keep the fire burning. Oral Roberts told us at ORU we were to “get our learning and keep our burning.” We need to make sure our passion for Jesus, for the life he wants us to live – make sure that passion remains burning for a lifetime. “Jesus, I want to please you and live for you above all else. I won’t let the fire go out! Here’s how I’ll make sure that fire keeps burning.” Be prepared!

One more thing about the foolish. They are the first to say, “Yeah, I don’t need to take any extra oil. I’ve got this.” “Yes, but what if he delays his coming and your lamp goes out?” “Rookie. I know what I’m doing.” Proverbs says, **“The way of a fool seems right to him but a wise man listens to advice.” Proverbs 12:15.** Listen to the advice from this preacher.

We pointed out that all of them became drowsy and fell asleep. If you are spiritually asleep today, wake up and listen to what I’m trying to tell you. You don’t know you’re asleep until you are awakened! Fall asleep in class or in some public setting and suddenly you startle, make that weird noise people make when they wake up sometimes. You didn’t know you had been asleep. I get it. This is your spiritual wake-up call! You haven’t been keeping the spiritual fire going in your life. You haven’t been watching for the bridegroom because you’ve been asleep. You didn’t know it, but you do now! Do something about it. While you’ve got time. Get the oil. Get the fire stirred up and burning. Get passionate about living for Jesus again!

You need to wake up because we all say and do things in our sleep, in our dreams, we would never do when we are awake. Have you ever dreamed you robbed a bank or something and then wake up and think, “That was a dream! Thank you Jesus! I thought I just ruined my life!” You talk in your sleep and say things you wouldn’t ever say. Walk in your sleep and don’t know where you are going or what you are doing. Wake up! It’s time to wake up and be prepared. Paul writes, **“You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled...” 1 Thessalonians 5:5-6**

Here’s another thing about falling asleep: No one likes the sound of the alarm! I hate it when the alarm goes off, but it serves an important purpose. You don’t want to miss the day, the

big event, the wedding, whatever it is you've got planned that day. Consider this message an alarm. Hopefully it's not as annoying as some alarms that go off, but this is the Holy Spirit's alarm, telling you it's time to wake up, get the oil you need, get the torch adjusted and burning brightly because the bridegroom is coming!

Jesus said, **"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"** The alarm is sounded in verse 6. The wake-up call is given. "He's coming." Verse 7 tells us all the virgins, wise and foolish woke up and trimmed their lamps and it was then that the foolish ones realized they hadn't prepared. Their lamps had burned out while they were asleep and now they had no oil. They argue with the wise virgins and finally, in verse 10, they go on their way to try to find someone at this late hour that would be open to sell them oil. Jesus says, **"While they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived."**

The point I'm making is there was this short time period between the midnight cry of verse 6 and the arrival of the groom in verse 10. Where are we? Where are you on this timeline? The cry seems to be going out. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that all of creation is groaning for redemption. I think it's fair to say that climate change and a new strain of coronavirus, a worldwide viral pandemic would once again qualify as indicators of creation groaning. Is this a sign of the end? I don't know. Could be! There are adequate signs everywhere. You would certainly have to say this is a wake-up call. Look how quickly everything has changed in our world. Absolutely, Jesus could come back for us today, tomorrow. But more importantly, he could be coming back for you, today, tomorrow. I certainly think we are living between the cry of verse 6 and verse 10. The alarm is being sounded to us as individuals, to the church, to the planet. How should we respond to the cry, **"Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"**

Prepare while there is time! This is a wakeup call. If you've been asleep, it's time to get up, check the lamp. The bridegroom is coming. Is there adequate oil? Are their changes that need to be made in terms of priorities? Choices? As individuals, families. Jesus is coming so how do we live in light of that reality?

And as a church, what changes do we make? The signs are here. Jesus is coming. How do we respond? Stockpile food and arms? Get more toilet paper? I think we respond by being more missional, more intentional in reaching out to share Jesus while there is still time. The world is fearful. Apparently it was C. S. Lewis that said **"In such a fearful world, we need a fearless church."** ...C.S. Lewis We aren't frightened by the threat of a pandemic or plague.

Trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death. Paul says, **“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Romans 8:37** None of these things can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Don't fear. Trust God and let's do all we can to awaken everyone else to the hope we have in Christ. Tell your neighbors not to fear but to put their trust in Jesus. When we see these signs happening, it means redemption is at hand, the bridegroom is coming and we need to reach everyone we can with the good news that Jesus saves and delivers and makes all the difference!

What do we do? Wake up, get fired up, fueled up, get the torches burning brighter than ever. The bridegroom is coming. Often in the Scripture oil is used to represent the Holy Spirit. Get full of the Holy Spirit. Ask him to fill your life, to direct your steps. If you've never been baptized in the Holy Spirit with the initial physical evidence of speaking in other tongues, ask Jesus to baptize you in his Holy Spirit today. Pray in the Spirit. Stir up the spiritual gifts that God has given you. The bridegroom is coming. Wake up. Get prepared.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 24 about no one knows the day or the hour when the Son of Man will return; not the angels; not even the Son, but only the Father. We know he is coming but we don't know when. In a middle eastern wedding all the attention was on the groom, not the bride. They knew he was coming and yet they were startled by the suddenness of his arrival. They know he's coming, but they fall asleep. They know he's coming but the lamps go out. Suddenly, the cry rings out, “Here he is!” Our heavenly bridegroom is coming. Don't let his return catch you by surprise. Jesus said, **“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” Matthew 25:13** When will he come for us? When will he come for you, for me? I don't know, so I'm going to live prepared, ready, watching. Anyday, anytime!

We haven't said anything about the end result for the foolish bridesmaids. They arrive late to the wedding banquet. The party was already going on but the door was shut. Does it mean they were lost? Some say yes. Some say they were still part of the wedding party but they miss the best part. The groom or the father of the groom, whoever answers the door tells them it was as if he didn't know them. They failed to prepare for the most important event, the arrival of the bridegroom!

People have used the parable to justify a variety of doctrinal positions on salvation and eternal security. What I want you to see and hear above all is the alarm and the warning to get prepared and ready while there is still time. The bridegroom isn't here yet, but I don't want to be

asleep when he returns. I don't want to risk missing out on anything God has prepared for his people. I want to be busy working for the Lord when he returns, doing all he has called me and us to do. I want him to find me watching for his return, ready to greet him, with the lamp trimmed and burning brightly.

This pandemic, whatever it proves to be, is not the first and it won't be the last. If Jesus delays his return there will be other pandemics, other natural events, other things that shake the world and shake the economy and cause people's hearts to fail them for fear. And every time it happens it is an opportunity for the church to stand, not in fear, but with purpose, and lovingly proclaim Jesus with our words, with our actions, and with our service.

Things have changed. We are getting a glimpse of how quickly things can change, of what could happen suddenly, unexpectedly. I think we can use this as a spiritual lesson, that a spiritual alarm has sounded. The cry rings out, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming!" Are you ready? Prepared? I don't care how much toilet paper you have, but are you prepared for Jesus to return or is there something you need to change? Something you need to do? Have you kept the fire burning and kept the oil supplied as you wait and watch for him? Are you telling others about Jesus? Are you calming their fears by pointing them to Jesus? We still have time. It's the in-between time. We are between the cry of his coming and his arrival. What steps do you need to take? What do you need to do?