

## HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

MATTHEW 25:1-13

Have you ever been caught unprepared? A few weeks ago I was speaking at a conference in the Milwaukee area, and there were many late nights. When the week was finally over, I stayed up yet another night trying to organize and pack for the return flight. I set the alarm on my cell phone and put it near the window, so I'd have to get up and walk across the room to turn it off. Then, as I had done every night that week, I called the front desk to request a wake-up call at 6 am. My flight was at nine o'clock, and I needed to drive an hour to the airport and return a rental car before boarding my flight.

But no one answered at the front desk. It was then that I made the fatal error of not walking down to the desk to locate someone. Instead, I figured that my cell phone alarm would be enough. So I turned off the light and fell asleep.

The next morning I looked at the clock and realized to my horror that it was 7:45! I had never heard the cell phone alarm; I suppose it never went off, because I must have set it wrong.

I ran around the room in a frenzy, trying to figure out what to do. I swept everything up in my arms and ran for the car. No shower. No breakfast. No hope, as I raced along the freeway toward the inevitable missing of my flight.

Have you ever been caught unprepared? Jesus spoke about the importance of being ready for His return. This portion of Scripture is often included in the Advent season, because as we mentioned at the beginning of the service, Advent means “coming.” During Advent we focus on both the first coming of Christ – when He became Emmanuel, God with us, to save us from our sins - as well as His second coming, when He will return in glory to judge the world and bring forth the completion of His Kingdom.

The point of this parable is simply this:

## **I. OUR ENTRANCE INTO GOD’S KINGDOM DEPENDS ON OUR BEING PREPARED FOR THE COMING OF JESUS CHRIST.**

In other words, Jesus is saying that the deciding factor as to where you will spend eternity, is your preparation – or lack of preparation, for His return.

Let’s notice the setting of this parable that Jesus tells. It comes in the middle of the Olivette Discourse, the teaching of Jesus on the end of the age and His return to judge the world and bring about the culmination of His Kingdom. And He speaks again and again of a division between those who are chosen, alert, faithful – and those who are not. He says, *“Two men will be in the field. One will*

*be taken and the other left.*” He tells of the faithful and wise servant who enters into his master’s kingdom, and the wicked servant who is assigned a place with the hypocrites and cast into the darkness. Finally, there is the description of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous.

So it is in the middle of all these teachings that the parable of the 10 virgins is found. Jesus tells the story of 10 virgins – 10 bridesmaids, who prepared themselves for the arrival of the bridegroom according to the local customs of their day. And He says, “If you want to know what it will be like when I return, then just consider these 10 bridesmaids.”

Now wedding ceremonies were a little different in Israel back then from today’s American weddings. The groom would arrive at the house of his bride-to-be, and then the bride and bridesmaids would accompany him in a fancy procession to either his house or his parents’ – where the wedding ceremony would take place.

If you could go back in time and attend a Jewish wedding, you would see the procession making its way through the night, the happy couple preceded by the light of the bridesmaids’ torches. Each bridesmaid held a pole with a copper kettle attached at the top. A rag that had been soaked in oil was stuffed into the kettle.

Once the rag was lit, the torch burned brightly, lighting up the procession as it made its way through the night.

There was one hitch though. They had to keep adding oil to the kettle to keep the torch burning. Scholars tell us that within 15 minutes, additional oil had to be poured on the rags to keep the light going. You can begin to see why this tradition of the bridesmaids as torchbearers died out! Not only did these women have to hold the heavy poles up for the procession, but they had to somehow carry an extra supply of oil along too.

So here we have the 10 bridesmaids. Let's consider their similarities:

- They've all been chosen.
- They all have their lamps.
- They've all gone out to wait for the arrival of the groom.
- Each has her pole, her kettle with the oil-soaked rag.
- And as the night goes on, they all fall asleep.

But that's where the similarity ends. Now come the differences between the bridesmaids. And Jesus says, "Pay attention. Because their differences are far more significant than their similarities." In v.2 He says, *"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."*

Five of the ladies were prepared. Five were not. And when the groom finally arrives, it says, *"They all woke up and trimmed their lamps."*

"Places everyone! Here we go!" But as they all get in place, some of the torches start to flicker and sputter, signaling that there are only a few minutes of oil left. Sort of like the gas gauge on your car, when the needle touches the red area by the letter E.

Now five of these ladies know that there is no way that their torches are going to make it to the house. And you know the rest of the story. The five have to go for more oil and arrive too late. The door has been shut and they cannot enter. In fact, the groom goes so far as to say to them: *"I don't know you."*

Here's the all-important lesson: Be prepared. Jesus put it this way: *"Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour of my return."*

In teaching the importance of being prepared for His return, Jesus points out two things.

**First, the time given to us to prepare ourselves is limited.**

There comes a point when it's too late to prepare. Too late to get ready. The Lord is slow to anger and rich in mercy, but there's a limit to His mercy and patience.

In each person's life there comes a point where the time to prepare yourself to meet the Lord runs out. And telling people that you're a Christian is not enough. Jesus said:

***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father..."***

**MATTHEW 7:21**

Obedience to God's will is part of the required preparation for entrance into the Kingdom of heaven. When does the time run out to show that obedience? At one of two points.

First, at death. Paul said: ***"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."***

**2 CORINTHIANS 5:10**

You see, once you die, the records are complete. You can't add or subtract from the evidence of your life, upon which you will be judged.

The second point when the time to show obedience to God runs out is when Jesus returns. Paul says in Thessalonians, ***"Christ will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the***

*gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord... on the day He comes to be glorified."*

## **2 THESSALONIANS 1:8**

It's interesting that these two points – your own death and the return of the Lord – are two things over which you have no control. And yet these two events will stop the clock on the time you're allotted to prepare to meet the Lord.

But Jesus teaches something else in this parable on the importance of being prepared for Him:

**Individual readiness for Christ cannot be transferred from one person to another.**

Whenever I read this parable of the 10 bridesmaids as a child, I always got upset at verse 9. The foolish bridesmaids run out of oil and ask the others for a loan. And what answer do the wise women give? *"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."*

That never sounded like a very Christian response to me. I thought, well, when push comes to shove, their true colors are shown!

But you see, I was missing the whole point. Common sense told the wise bridesmaids that the oil they had brought along would only be sufficient for five torches, not ten. They were prepared and the others were not. And when Jesus returns, that's it! No more time to prepare! At that point, your friends can't help you out. Neither can your family. In that moment, your own relationship with Jesus Christ will be the only thing that matters. Psalm 49 says, *"No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him."*

Is your relationship to Jesus Christ marked by the wisdom of preparation for His coming, or the foolishness of negligence?

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a group of ships set out from England to search for the North Pole. The journey was to take two to three years. Each ship carried an additional steam engine, but only a 12-day supply of coal.

Instead of additional coal, each ship made room for a 1200-volume library, a hand organ that played 50 songs, china place settings, cut glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware. The expedition carried no special clothing for the arctic, only the standard uniforms for the British Navy.

Years later, arctic Eskimos came across the frozen remains of the expedition. The men were dressed in their naval finery and pulling

a lifeboat loaded with the sterling silver. Their lack of planning is beyond comprehension! But perhaps it will motivate us to be better outfitted for our own journey this Advent season.

How are you planning for eternity? There will come a day when most of the things that seem so important to you will vanish: your career, your success, your social status, your friends. Will the Lord find you diligent in your preparation for His return? Will He find you trusting in Him alone for your salvation? Will He find you producing the spiritual fruit that will last for eternity, or focused instead on the unimportant? Will He find you watching and praying for His return? Or will He find you in the midst of other things? The Bible says:

*“Now is the day of salvation.*

*Now is the day of God’s favor!”*

### **2 CORINTHIANS 6:2**

Jesus told this parable to point out the negative consequences of being caught unprepared at His return. But there is a positive theme to the parable as well.

## **II. GOD CALLS US TO LIVE LIVES THAT DEMONSTRATE OUR EXPECTATION THAT HE WILL SUDDENLY RETURN.**

Jesus finishes the parable with a command:

*“Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour of my return.”*

How are we to keep watch until the Lord comes? Turn to Luke 12:36. Jesus described those waiting for their master’s return as those who:

*“... can immediately open the door for him when he comes and knocks.”*

If the Lord returned today and knocked on your door, how many of you would want to say, “Just a minute!” - because certain areas of your life aren’t in order?

Maybe you’d say:

- There’s someone I’ve offended and I need to first go and apologize.
- With all the stress and busyness of this past month or two, I’ve withheld spending time with my spouse or kid, and I need to do that first.
- There’s someone that I’ve been too busy to encourage, and I need to reach out and affirm him/her.
- There’s someone I know who’s been wandering away from the faith, and I haven’t had the courage to confront them – to speak those words of truth that they need to hear.

This time of year we sing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let every heart prepare Him room."

So how do you prepare Him room in your heart? Not by busyness or shopping or entertaining yourself. No, the way to prepare Him room is by obeying Him and by pursuing intimacy with Him. And there's a price to intimacy with God! It's never on sale. It never comes cheaply or easily.

To prepare room for the Lord in your heart requires some serious self-examination before God and then some hard changes.

Unpopular changes. Lifestyle changes. Important changes in the secret places of your life.

Chuck Swindoll says that today's church looks more like a herd of cattle in a stampede than a flock of sheep beside green pastures and still waters. Are you running at a frantic pace, or seeking out quiet places that nourish your soul? The still waters where you can see His reflection and your own? You can't enjoy genuine intimacy with God if you're busy.

Each year the four weeks of Advent give us a fresh opportunity to recommit ourselves to pursuing intimacy with God. To say as Paul did:

*"I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."*

**PHILIPPIANS 3:8**

Each year I read through the poems of Ann Weems in her book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. My favorites are titled "This Year Will Be Different" and "In Search of Our Kneeling Places."

Who among us does not have dreams  
that this year will be different?

Who among us does not intend to go peacefully, leisurely,  
carefully toward Bethlehem?

For who among us likes to cope with the commercialism  
of Christmas

which lures us to tinsel not only the tree,  
but also our hearts?

Who among us does not yearn for  
time for our hearts to ponder the Word of God?  
Moments of kneeling and bursts of song?  
The peace of quiet calm for our spirit's journey?

This year we intend to follow the Star  
instead of the crowd.

This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem

and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.

In the midst of shopping sprees

let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.

Through the tinsel

let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.

This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem

and find our kneeling places.

I want to tell you about another British explorer, Ernest Shackleton.

In 1914 he led a team of 28 men toward the opposite pole, in hopes of being the first expedition to cross the continent of Antarctica.

But his ship, the Endurance, became stuck in the ice, where it drifted for 10 months before finally sinking. Shackleton and his crew left the ship, towing lifeboats over the ice until they reached the open sea. They landed on Elephant Island and set up a crude camp.

Shackleton decided that the only way to save his men was to take five of them with him in a lifeboat and journey 800 miles in order to secure another ship and supplies.

But time after time, he failed to return to Elephant Island because of the ice. For months his men waited in a hut made of rocks with the lifeboats on top as a roof.

Finally an open path through the sea and ice allowed Shackleton to reach the island. His men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled onboard and the boat turned around and head out. No sooner had the boat cleared their narrow escape when the ice crashed together again. The window of time to get in and out was only half an hour!

Shackleton asked his men, "How did it happen that you were all packed and ready to go? You were standing on the shore, ready to leave at a moment's notice."

His second in command answered, "We never gave up hope that you would come back for us. Whenever the sea was partly clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and packed our things, saying, 'The boss may come today.'"

What a great example of being prepared! Their eager expectation, their daily preparation, and their trust in the character of their leader should inspire us in our own heart preparation this Advent.

Today's message is titled "Home for Christmas." By that I mean, do you want to find yourself kneeling in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve? Enjoying an intimacy with the Lord that you've never known? It starts today, on the first of Advent.

There is nothing – absolutely nothing of greater importance than knowing Christ intimately. Preparing room for Him in your heart. And it's not enough to know what you need to do. To recognize where you've gone wrong. No, the foolish bridesmaids knew that! They could hear their lamps sputtering when they started out. They asked themselves, "Should I go get more oil now?" But they talked themselves into believing that everything would be okay. The oil would somehow last. And don't we do the same thing?

Jesus is saying, "You need to move to make things right..."

- To carve out time to be alone with me
- To take time this week to do that kind thing
- To write the letter or make the phone call
- To block out time to meet with that person

As you leave the sanctuary today, you'll find a set of Advent readings from the Bible. It's titled "Jesus, Be in my Christmas."

Will you commit yourself to faithfully reading these portions of Scripture each day? The Lord is waiting to reveal all kinds of insights and truth to you, if you'll take the time to read, to ponder, to pray.

But you've got to choose it. You have to do the wise thing, just like the wise bridesmaids did. Don't be caught unprepared when you get to Christmas Eve. You have to count the cost of other activities, as Paul says, and pursue intimacy with Christ. As I said, it's never on sale and it never comes cheaply.

If you're feeling far away from the Lord, empty, shallow in your prayer life, enslaved to your schedule, or lonely in your faith – like the prodigal son who walked away from intimacy with his father and exchanged it for the toys of the world – be encouraged! You too can be home for Christmas. Today you can start heading home to intimacy with Him. It's never too late to prepare room in your heart for Him!