

## **YOU LOOK FORWARD TO HEAVEN WISELY**

**MATTHEW 25:1-13**

My brother-in-law – his name is Merrill - used to be a navigator in the Air Force. For several years he was assigned to the Strategic Air Command as a navigator on a plane used to re-fuel B-52 bombers in the air. Now Merrill had to go on something called alert for one week per month. He was required to stay on the base in a special housing area with other Air Force personnel – pilots, other navigators and other support people. Why? For that one week period a month, Merrill had to be ready at a moment's notice to respond to the President's order to send nuclear armed B-52 bombers towards what was then the Soviet Union in response to incoming missiles. He was on call to climb into his plane and help re-fuel those B-52s on their long flight to retaliate against an enemy's attack. He told me that on a few occasions the call to get airborne was actually given. Most of the time, it was quickly determined that a computer glitch of some kind had occurred. But on one occasion, Merrill really thought World War III had started. I was struck by the fact that while most of sleep peacefully at night, work at our jobs, go to school or play with our kids, there are people who are on alert – on call – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, year after year after year protecting our country from an enemy's attack. They're protecting us from something that might happen but which all of us fervently hope will never happen.

Matthew 25 contains three of Jesus' parables. I want to consider the first of those three parables with you today. In the previous chapter – Matthew 24 – Jesus is teaching people about what was certainly going to happen in the future not what just might happen. What He describes is inevitable; no amount of wishing or hoping can alter it. Because what Jesus describes there is inevitable, how His listeners respond to it now is important. Now, Bible scholars and Christians interpret Matthew 24 differently. Personally, I believe Jesus predicts the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. which occurred 40 years after He first spoke these words. But Jesus also predicts what we refer to as His second coming. He teaches that the event itself – His second coming - is certain but the date of it is unknown. These three stories in Matthew 25 build on what Jesus taught in Matthew 24. Each one tells you how you need to approach life in the light of what's inevitable: Jesus will return to this earth one day. The Kingdom of God will be fully realized. Jesus will rule and reign over everything.

Let's read the first of these three stories – sometimes identified as the Parable of the Ten Virgins. It's as if Jesus says, "Now in light of My inevitable return, Kingdom people act like this...." Have you noticed that some followers of Jesus get enormously fascinated by what they think the Bible teaches about the future? They study these prophetic charts and colorful graphs. I suggest that Jesus is far less interested in the details of what will happen around His second coming - when this event will happen or whether this event will precede that event. Instead, He wants you and me to be prepared for His coming regardless of when or how it occurs. When Jesus is King, you look forward to heaven wisely. So, here's the first great message of this story:

## **BE READY.**

Understanding something of the marriage ceremony customs in Jesus' day and age helps you grasp Jesus' point. Weddings were very special occasions in Jesus' culture just as they are for us. The wedding day itself included lots of dancing, eating and general merriment. When night came, however, the bride was taken off to the bridegroom's house by her bridesmaids using torches to light their way. When the bridal party arrived at the bridegroom's house, he wasn't there by intention. He was out celebrating with his buddies, but, then, he would begin to work his way closer and closer to his home. Sometimes arranging for a big delay heightened the sense of expectation. This usually involved good natured haggling between the bridegroom and the bride's family about appropriate gifts for the bride's family. It was all part of the fun. Finally, about a half hour before midnight, the bridegroom would arrive at his own home with much advance fanfare. He would claim his bride and they'd go off to his father's home where the actual wedding ceremony was held and the reception – which included a big wedding feast - followed. Then, once the feast began, the door was shut and no one else was allowed to enter.

Jesus' story revolves around ten, young women acting as bridesmaids. There are similarities among all ten. All ten are invited to the wedding ceremony obviously. All say, "Sure, I'd love to come! Count me in!" All approve of the marriage by virtue of their participation in it. And all become drowsy and fall asleep waiting for the bridegroom to show up at his home and claim his bride. He finally makes his appearance. That's where the differences between these ten women emerge. Five are ready; five are not. Five have some extra oil for their lamps in case the bridegroom got delayed which, apparently, is the case here. These five thought ahead, planned and are prepared. They prove to be – in Jesus' words – wise. But the other five bridesmaids aren't prepared at all and made no attempt to be prepared. They reveal themselves to be foolish. I think Jesus is suggesting that He Himself is a kind of bridegroom, the ten young women are those who respond to His message about the Kingdom of God in some way, His arrival refers to His second coming and the wedding feast is a symbol of a day in the future when the Kingdom of God will be fully revealed.

This story had meaning for Jesus' first listeners. Some of them truly heard Jesus and became His followers; others listened but didn't buy into it. It had meaning, also, for the first generation of Jesus followers in the first century who were wondering why Jesus hadn't returned yet a second time. The point of this story is – "That's not for you to know. Just be ready!" Likewise, Jesus' story should have a great deal of meaning for you, me and everyone else on the planet right now. That's what I want you to think with me about just now.

Many people – especially folk who go to church a lot – have heard Jesus' invitation to make Him their King. You can respond ineffectively. You can admire and like Jesus. But like the five foolish women in Jesus' story, you may

not be ready to meet Him. You can look religious. You're can be an incredibly nice, decent person. But have you ever been born again by the Spirit of God? That's the first and most important way to be ready for Jesus' return: be born again! Has there ever been that inner, spiritual and intensely personal surrender to Jesus as your King. If not, you're just not ready. Here's the key question: are you ready? Which group of women do you resemble – the wise ones or the foolish ones? Are you prepared if Jesus returned today?

Notice what else this parable implies. A relationship with Jesus isn't something that can be just transferred from one person to another. The five wise women refused to share their oil with the foolish ones. That sounds kind of selfish at first glance, doesn't it? But Jesus is making a spiritual point here. The wise women don't refuse to share out of selfishness, but rather because they want to be faithful to the bridegroom. They need this oil to last all the way to where the reception is being held. Certain things in life can't be borrowed or exchanged; one of those is a personal relationship with Jesus. You must enter into that for yourself. You can't get by on someone else's faith in Jesus. You must have your own faith in Jesus. You can't receive the gift of eternal life because someone else received it. On the day Jesus returns, you will stand or fall on your own. Your mother's faith is not your faith. Your spouse's commitment is not your commitment. Your parent's allegiance to King Jesus is not your allegiance. So where do you stand? Are you personally ready for Jesus' return?

Here's another point the parable makes. Lost opportunities can't be regained. Whenever Jesus returns, those who are ready will enter His Kingdom forever. Those who aren't ready will never be allowed to come in. There is one of two ways you will meet King Jesus. You will either meet Him at the moment of your death or when He returns at His second coming. Death often comes without much warning, doesn't it? And, then, Jesus' second coming will definitely come unannounced. It's very easy to leave things so late spiritually that you can no longer get prepared to meet God. God doesn't promise you tomorrow nor does the Bible ever say that becoming a follower of Jesus will somehow be easier tomorrow. In fact, just the opposite is true. Every time you reject the gift of God's grace, or you say, "No, I'd rather not" to the Holy Spirit's urging to surrender to the King or you find some excuse to say, "Maybe next Sunday... next month... next year" your heart actually becomes a little bit harder spiritually. Is Jesus your Savior? Is Jesus your Lord? Is Jesus your King? Are you ready?

"Rick, why this sense of urgency?" Because Jesus never forgot something we find hard to remember: one day the door to the Kingdom of God will close and it will be too late for those on the outside. I realize that sounds so final, so harsh, so intolerant and so politically incorrect. All I can do is point you to what Jesus said – the most loving Being ever to walk this earth. He said one day the door into His Kingdom will close. On what side of that door will you be? William Willimon is a well known author and speaker as well as a Methodist bishop in Alabama. He tells a story about going to a funeral with his wife for a man named

Joe. The officiating pastor was a backwoods preacher without much education or sophistication. Willimon says that the funeral was one of the most tasteless, inappropriate and excruciating experiences he'd ever witnessed. This pastor ranted and raved about Joe's godless life. He urged the grieving family members to repent with statements like, "It's too late for Joe! But it's not too late for you!" Willimon left the service angry at the preacher's insensitivity. On the way home, he and his wife discussed what they'd just witnessed. She agreed that the preacher's approach was classless and tasteless. But then she said something else, "It wouldn't be so bad if what he said wasn't true."

My friend, I would rather frighten you into the Kingdom of God than to comfort you into an eternity in hell. Are you ready? If Jesus returned today, are you ready? Be ready. That's the first great message of this parable. There's a related message here that's just as important:

### **STAY READY.**

How do you do that – stay ready? First, you live with a healthy tension. You accept the fact that Jesus is coming again – that's a certainty. But you also accept the fact that you don't know when He's returning – that's the uncertainty. That healthy tension can result in an appropriate sense of both assurance and anticipation. What happens to most students who know that final exams are six months away? But suppose those same students found out that they won't even have final exams at all? Their response would be even worse! The ideal situation for those students is to let them know there will be a test but not let them know exactly when the test will happen. That healthy tension provides a strong reason to stay "studied up" and ready all the time. God wants you to stay ready for Jesus' return without knowing when it will happen. That healthy tension provides you a strong reason to stay ready all the time for Jesus' return.

How do you stay ready? Second, you live out tomorrow's values in today's world. When you live your life today in a certain way because of what you know is going to happen tomorrow, that's staying ready. True, you don't know much about tomorrow, but you do know that Jesus will return. When your decisions, your values, your lifestyle choices and your everyday priorities reflect what you are certain will happen tomorrow, then you are staying ready.

How do you stay ready? Third, you keep life's focus on Jesus and His Kingdom. In the 1987 NCAA regional basketball finals, LSU was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. You've seen this happen lots of times in athletic contests and it happened that day. LSU began playing differently in order to try and protect its lead. The players started watching the clock rather than playing wholeheartedly. As a result, Indiana closed the gap, won the game by one point and eventually went on to become NCAA champions. What happened? The LSU players lost their focus. You can lose your focus spiritually. You're called to serve King Jesus faithfully and energetically until the

end of the game. Your relationship with the King is more important than your job, your career goals, your family and your personal dreams and ambitions. It's possible to get so immersed in and preoccupied with the things of this life that God and His Kingdom seem very remote and distant. Instead of letting the Kingdom of God energize every part of your life today, it just becomes something you look forward to you when you die.

How do you stay ready? Fourth, you keep alert to the devil's attacks. Steve Green, a Christian music artist, tells about getting to know some of the work crews in the large auditoriums where he held concerts with Bill and Gloria Gaither for several years. These workers – sometimes called “riggers” – walked four inch rafter beams – often a hundred feet above the concrete floor – to hang sound speakers and spotlights. They were paid very well for this dangerous work. Green says that these riggers weren't bothered by the sight of that floor a hundred feet below. What they didn't like were jobs in buildings that had false ceilings – acoustical tile slung just a couple of feet below the rafters. If they fell, that tile would never hold their weight. But their minds seemed to play tricks on them and they would be tempted to be more careless than usual.

The devil operates like that. He's most effective – not when he tries to scare you to death – but rather when he persuades you that there's little danger that you will fall spiritually. When you recognize that you are in a very real spiritual war every day of your life, you live differently. You live alertly. I'm amazed at the number of times the Bible encourages you to be alert. In other words, stay ready! “For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don't belong to darkness and night. So be on your guard, not asleep like the others. Stay alert and be clearheaded.... Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.” (1Thess. 5:5-6; 1 Peter 5:8 NLT) You're alert to your own areas of weakness. You're alert to the potentially negative influence of others. You're alert to how godless values and attitudes in the culture around you can creep into your heart and mind.

The year was 1915. Joseph Duveen headed up on the world's great art firms. Duveen wanted to send a young man – one of his art experts – to England to examine some ancient pottery. Passage had been booked on a ship called the Lusitania. Then the German embassy issued its warning that the ship might be torpedoed. Duveen wanted to call off the trip. He told the young art expert, “I can't take the risk of you being killed.” But the young man replied, “Don't worry. I'm a strong swimmer and when I read what was happening in the Atlantic, I began hardening myself by spending time every day in a tub of ice water. At first, I could only stand being in there for a few minutes, but this morning I stayed in that tub nearly two hours.” Duveen laughed at what seemed ridiculous preparation. It sounded preposterous. But he gave his permission for the young man to board the Lusitania. As you might know, the ship was torpedoed by a German submarine and sank. But that young man was picked up by another

ship after spending nearly five hours in the chilly ocean water. He was still in excellent condition.

Jesus isn't saying in this parable that being ready or staying ready is what gets you into the Kingdom of God. God's grace is the only thing that does that for you. But here's the truth that you need to face. What's the evidence that you're in the Kingdom of God and that Jesus is your King? Jesus points to readiness. So, be ready and stay ready. When Jesus is King, you look forward to heaven wisely.