

Don't Leave Yourself Behind!

“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.”

Have you ever run out of gas? It is hard to do that nowadays. Cars have a gas gauge so you can easily see if you are getting low. Modern cars have a little light that goes on, indicating that you are getting low. You have a gallon or two left, but it is telling you it is time to stop and gas up. Even if your gauge is busted, you could do what I did when that happened in my 1969 Impala. After you filled your tank, you jotted down the mileage, calculated how many miles you can go before running out and write it down. I would calculate it so I never went below a quarter tank and taped the number on the dash. You have to be rather foolish to run out of gas, yet some people do. If you paid a little attention, you will never run out of gas.

Our parable today serves a little bit like that gas gauge. It is a reminder that Jesus is coming and we would do well to remember that. We don't want to be like the five virgins who foolishly didn't plan properly and were left out. So, let's be wise. Let's check our gauge so we are ready when he comes.

I. What it means to be unprepared.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” To help us keep watch, Jesus uses a parable about a wedding. What goes on in a wedding today? First, a man and a woman decide to get married. This is known as an engagement. Note that they are not married yet. They use this time to plan the wedding. When the day comes they have a wedding service where they become husband and wife, and then they have a big public reception.

It was a little different in Jesus' day. The couple usually got married right away. Often it was a short five-minute service. But they didn't come together as husband and wife yet. They remained separated until the day of their celebration. Then they came together as husband and wife. This is why Joseph, when he found out Mary was pregnant, was going to divorce her quietly. They were married, but didn't come together as husband and wife yet because they didn't have the public celebration.

Now this is what happens on the day of that celebration. The groom, dressed like a king, would ride a donkey to the bride's house. The guests would wait along the rode and when the groom rode by, the guests would join him, forming a long parade trailing behind him. Often it was at night and each guest would carry a torch or lantern. When they all arrived at the bride's home, the gate would be locked.

Why did they lock the gate? When my niece was married six years ago, the reception was held in downtown Fargo. They had a security guard at the door. I was a little puzzled until I stepped outside. Even at only eleven at night, the streets were filled with loud people, some of whom had been drinking. It would have been disastrous if a couple of them decided to “crash” the reception. Hence the guard, and in Jesus' parable, locking the door.

But there is a problem. In Jesus' parable, five guests missed out of the celebration. Like the rest, they were invited. Like the rest, they went into the streets to wait. Like the rest they had brought their lanterns and oil. But that is where they were foolish. The rest brought extra oil just in case. They didn't. The bridegroom was late. Everyone took it easy. They even nodded off for a while. Why not? You need the rest for the big party. But the cry woke everyone up, ***‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’*** Everyone got up and refilled their empty lanterns with the extra oil they had brought, but not these five virgins. They had none.

In desperation, they asked for oil, but no one had enough to share with them. Desperately they tried to find an open store to buy some. While they were gone, the bridegroom came, the procession entered his house and the gate was locked. ***“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.’”*** It was too late.

The parable is simple. The bridegroom is Jesus. The wedding celebration is heaven. The ten virgins or guests are all those who belong to a church or congregation on earth. This parable is not intended as an evangelism parable like the lost sheep. It is talking to folks who are already members. Why? It is not because Jesus isn't concerned for the lost. He is. But Jesus is concerned about the lost he already found, that they do not become lost again. And as the parable sadly points out, many who are in church will miss out on heaven. Why? They are foolish. They assume that belonging to a church is enough. You can see them go through the list. Baptized? Check. Sunday school? Been there, check. Confirmed? Check. Ok, done. Now, on to something else. It is like filling your tank with gas and ignoring it. Even when the light goes on, you ignore it. You figure you

have enough until you run out. The five foolish virgins ran out. But what did they run out of? Faith.

Picture faith as a living organism. Feed it, it grows. Starve it, it grows weaker. It takes a lot to kill saving faith, and God prevents the devil or anyone from snatching it from you. But if faith comes from hearing the message, what happens to a faith that doesn't hear it anymore?

Being foolish is gambling. You assume what bit of God and his Word you had in the past is enough; you don't want to fill up again. It also assumes you don't have to follow Christ today, that is, join his wedding procession on the way to heaven, that somehow you can forget about him and knock on the door after Judgment and that somehow, because you were once a child of God and once in church, he should open the door. ***"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'"***

II. What it means to be prepared?

So, how can we be prepared for his return? First, be wise. Remember what Paul said to Timothy, how from infancy Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures which made him WISE unto salvation. Being prepared is being wise unto salvation. You are wise. Now, let's remain wise. How? How can we be just as excited about Jesus and heaven today as when we sang about him at age seven in the children's Christmas service? Simple. The answer is "daily repentance." It is as though each day you are converted and born again. It is David saying, "I have sinned," and being told God forgives him. It is the tax collector beating his chest because of his sins, unworthy even to look up to heaven, but going home justified because of Christ. It is Job saying, "I know my Redeemer lives and in the end I will see him." It is the fact that we, lost and condemned creatures, are saved by the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Does this mean our faith dies overnight as we sleep and we need to be converted again? No. You are still a believer while you sleep and when you wake up. But it means checking and filling the tank.

Repentance is studying your life and heart and mind and being shamed over the sins you commit, scared of them, hating them. But repentance is also finding relief that God is just and right to forgive us and to cleanse us from all sins and promise us eternal life in Jesus. If you heard last Sunday that Jesus died for you and you are forgiven, that is good. It should last more than a week. It does. It takes a lot to kill saving faith.

But here is the difference between the wise and the foolish. The foolish will say, "I was baptized. I was confirmed. I had gone to church," as if the tank will never run dry. They will gamble there will always be tomorrow. The wise, however, know today may be the day the Bridegroom comes and don't want to gamble. They will check the tank, top it off and are ready.

The key, of course, is God's Word and his Sacraments. You top off your faith with God's Word as you top off the tank with gas. It means you don't say, "I was baptized." You say, "I am baptized" because Baptism means as much to you today as then. It means you don't say, "I was confirmed." Rather you say, "I am confirmed." It means you do not say, "I did believe," but you say, "I do believe."

Soon we will remember our members whom the Lord thankfully has taken out of this awful world into his heaven. We are happy for them. We don't have to pray for them. They will never cry or be tempted again. But don't think just about them. Think about yourselves. Let's make sure we don't leave ourselves behind. Parents, you want to make sure your children are rooted in God's Word so you send them to Sunday school, catechism, our day school, whatever. But don't forget about yourselves. We pray for world missions and missionaries and that God turns people away from unbelief to faith. Good. But don't forget to pray for yourself, too, that God's kingdom keeps coming to you.

So you don't leave yourself behind, put on Christ every day. When I dress in the morning, I sometimes feel like a soldier putting on his gear. I put on my glasses. I put a hanky in my left front pocket. I put my keys in my right front pocket. I put a pen in my shirt pocket. I put my cell phone in my pants pocket and my wallet in my back pocket. I am ready for the day. Now imagine dressing each day with God's Word, so we wear the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation and the shield of faith. Now we are ready, not only for the day, but the Day just in case the call goes out, "The Bridegroom comes. Come and join him." Amen.