

FIRST LESSON: Amos 5: 18-24  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25: 1-13  
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***“Really Prepared”***  
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For all like myself who have ever been late because they’re disorganized, the parable of the ten young women (alternatively referred to as virgins or bridesmaids in our translations) is really uncomfortable! We can’t help but feel for the five clueless young women. It seems so arbitrary and unforgiving to just shut the door on them because they messed up. It just doesn’t feel like something a gracious God would do! So of course, we have to do what I normally love to do—head straight to the historical context!

Weddings were a big deal. Life in an ancient village did not have a lot of excitement. It was pretty much hard work, plain food, sleep, start over. Every day was survival mode. The women of the village had their social time at the well, the men on the Sabbath sitting around talking. Any event—especially a wedding—was a huge occasion. A wedding celebration lasted days. After the ceremony there was feasting and dancing. It was something literally everyone looked forward to. And an important part of the ceremony was the procession from the home of the bride’s parents to the couple’s new home, typically just a partitioned off section of the groom’s family home. The pathway from one place to another would be lit by attendants holding torches or lamps. In this story the bride has chosen ten young unmarried women of the town to fulfill this responsibility. These young women would have been very young by our standards, likely somewhere between ages 12 and 16. But it was expected that they would take their responsibility very seriously. This was not a casual thing to be left to the last minute. It would be like being asked to be part of Megan and Harry’s wedding and blowing it off. It was the job of the young women to await the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride’s house and greet him with a procession of light. Once he arrived, they would process with him and his bride to their new home. **There was no electricity back then.** Dark was really, really dark. This wasn’t just a pretty custom; it was necessary. But in this story the bridegroom was delayed. They waited and waited but he still didn’t come. Finally, they fell asleep.

Now it did sometimes happen that the bridegroom was delayed. Marriages were a bit like business contracts between two families. Sometimes there were last minute financial negotiations. *Sounds romantic, doesn’t it?* But it was very unusual to be delayed till midnight. This is a parable, however, and things are told in extremes in parables. In this story the fact that the young women fell asleep was not the problem. Lack of preparation was. They all woke up when they heard the bridegroom coming. They trimmed their lamps. But

some of them had not brought any extra oil, and they were almost out. They asked the others if they could have some of theirs, but if they did, everyone's lamps would go out. It would be a terrible thing if the bridegroom were left to stumble in pitch darkness to his destination—a dreadful violation of custom and common sense. It sounds very uncharitable but the five prepared ones reckoned some light was better than no light, and told the unprepared girls to go off and buy some—at midnight! This event should have been one of the highlights of their lives. The fact that they were unprepared was unconscionable.

While the foolish bridesmaids went in search of oil the bridegroom came and took his bride to their new home. The procession complete, the door was shut. And when the unprepared young women came knocking at the door to be let in, the bridegroom turned them away, saying, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you." This seems like a really harsh attitude, but it was an appropriate response to such a gross violation of responsibility. The foolish bridesmaids had shown a total lack of respect for the couple by their lack of preparedness. They almost ruined everything. In this culture an insult like that would be remembered for generations.

Not all parables are also allegories, but this one clearly is. The characters in the story all have recognizable parallels.

- The bridesmaids are the church that is waiting for the Second Coming. It's rather disturbing to realize that half are unprepared.
- The bridegroom is Christ.
- The wedding feast is the great celebration that will come when the battle is over and we are all safely home with God.
- The delay of the bridegroom, of course, is the delay of the Second Coming. Time and time again people have tried and failed to predict the Second Coming. Here we are told that it will be "at midnight." In other words, stop trying to find the date!
- The bridegroom's arrival is the Second Coming.
- The closing of the door is the final judgment.

*But what is the oil?* There is no universally accepted interpretation of the oil. Martin Luther, of course, said it was faith. Other similar parables might provide some clues. The faithful slave is the one found working when the master returns. In the parable of the talents the message is that we are to use the gifts and talents God gave us for God's work. In the Judgment of the Nations (25:31-46), the ones who are rewarded are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited the prisoner. Putting it all together in context we would have to say that the "oil" is faith, but by faith we mean a faithful life. It is not enough to just believe in Jesus. We have to serve Jesus. Living prepared for Christ's return means living the way God wants us to live.

There is a time to prepare, and a time when it is too late. On a practical level we all know this. When we were in school we had time to study for a test, but when the test came the time for studying was over. If we weren't ready it was too late. Many of us still have nightmares that we're about to take a test for a class we forgot to attend! If I have an important meeting or interview to get

ready for but I dither around doing this and that until the time for the meeting has come and I'm still in my sweats and not ready, it's too late. If I have to catch a plane or a train but sit around and watch a TV program while I should be heading out the door, it will not wait for me. It will leave whether I'm ready or not. And as abstract as the Second Coming of Christ may feel, when it happens, time's up. But there is also another time that will come to every one of us whether we are ready or not. Every one of us will some day die, regardless of whether or not we're ready. Death will not ask our permission first. It's like that bumper sticker I saw years ago in our church parking lot—"A lot of people who wait till the 11<sup>th</sup> hour die at 10:30."

Scripture consistently warns us that our faith must be more than skin deep. It must be real, and costly. Those who Amos prophesied to looked forward to the "day of the Lord" or the day of final judgment, because they believed on that day everything would go their way. But Amos, pointing out their hypocrisy and injustice proclaimed that for them the "day of the Lord" would be a fearsome day of judgment. God rejected the superficiality of their religious services. God said, "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

We can hold as many beautiful religious services as we like, but if we are unjust and lacking in mercy towards those in need, God will judge us. We will be called to account on the basis of our faith—but true faith cannot be faked. It is not enough to say, "I claim Jesus as my personal savior," as if God is limited by our use of those words. God knows our hearts, and real faith is lived faith. We do not know when Christ will return and we do not know the day we will die. Today is the day to prepare. Amen.

#### Amos 5: 18-24

**18** Woe to you who long  
for the day of the Lord!

Why do you long for the day of the Lord?

That day will be darkness, not light.

**19** It will be as though a man fled from a lion  
only to meet a bear,  
as though he entered his house  
and rested his hand on the wall  
only to have a snake bite him.

**20** Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light—  
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

**21** "I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
your assemblies are a stench to me.

**22** Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
I will have no regard for them.

- 23** Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
**24** But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Matthew 25: 1-13

**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.’

**13** “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.