

On Living Prepared

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Date: 19 October 2025

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[0 : 00] I left the pulpit there and Pastor Andrew is filling it for us this morning and he also sends his greetings. I know he's done a few times in the pulpit here and really also considers it a privilege to worship with this congregation as do I.

I'm going to invite you to turn to Matthew 25 this morning and we'll read from God's word there verses 1 through 13 of Matthew chapter 25. It falls in a section where Jesus has his disciples alone on the Mount of Olives.

He has processed into Jerusalem that final time in the last week of his life. And here on the Mount of Olives he has a series of teaching beginning in chapter 24 about his second coming.

And so after chapter 24 is a pretty straightforward teaching. Chapter 25 is a series of parables by which he hopes to communicate the details and a frame of mind for the disciples in that in between the already but not yet after Christ's ascension and before he comes again.

Hopefully you found Matthew 25 by now. And if you haven't just ask you to pause flipping pages in your Bible so that we could pray for the Holy Spirit's leading. Almighty eternal and merciful God whose word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths.

[1 : 38] Open and illuminate our minds that we may purely and perfectly understand your word. And that our lives may be transformed to what we have rightly understood in the word.

So that nothing may be displeasing to your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. This is Matthew 25 beginning at verse 1. Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.

Five of them were foolish and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps they took no oil with them.

But the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry.

Here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him. Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise.

[2 : 39] Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out. But the wise answered saying since there will not be enough for us and you go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.

While they were going to buy the bridegroom came. And those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast and the door was shut.

Afterward the other virgins came also saying Lord, Lord open to us. But he answered. Truly I say to you I do not know you.

Watch therefore. For you know neither the day nor the hour. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. I remember vividly my dad's softball bag.

It's the coolest vintage duffel bag. Trinity Christian College printed in all capital white block letters. The navy blue now grayed as much by the mess in the garage as from the dim, lit, and dusty dugout it's dragged to each week.

[3 : 55] Inside there were always a few softballs. There was one of those ball and strike clickers. Of course cleats and a glove and some loose sunflower seeds.

On the zipper hung a master lock. Knowing now my dad's complete inability to diversify his passwords, I could guess what it was with some good reliability.

But as a kid it represented a formidable defense. When Thursday night finally came, dad needed only to have his bag to know he had everything he needed.

In our parable this morning, ten virgins have their own version of a ready bag in the form of oil lanterns. It's here the disciples sit alone amongst the short trees and rock terrain of the Mount of Olives listening to Jesus.

Jerusalem cityscape as backdrop. Delivering a series of teachings on his second coming. Jesus' message is clear and repeated.

[5 : 06] Jesus equips his disciples to live prepared and therefore peaceful lives. This is what Jesus communicates to his disciples repeatedly.

He's equipped his disciples to live prepared and therefore peaceful lives. We learn this lesson by the example of two groups. Five foolish virgins and five wise virgins.

First, the foolish virgins experience the anxiety of an unprepared life. Now we should mention that in many ways these foolish virgins can be counted among the wise.

At the beginning of the passage they're counted together. There are ten virgins. Perhaps they're even dressed similarly to express their lives of purity. They set out, lamps in hand, to the place the bridegroom has set.

Excitement grows as evening comes. Then the sun begins to set. The bridegroom takes a while, longer than expected.

[6 : 14] Delayed, it says in verse five. If you've ever been to a wedding that was delayed, you can wonder along with these ten. As they sit swatting cicadas and other bugs that seem to rise with the cool moon.

Is he okay? Did he change his mind? Did we misunderstand? Are you sure he didn't mean van der Plukes instead of van der Dykes?

So much time passes, in fact, that all ten virgins succumb to their drowsiness. And all the while, these women are indistinguishable from one another, except for one very important detail.

Five of them neglected to bring oil. And Jesus rightly describes these five as foolish, for this is truly foolish.

Now, I've always pictured something like a glass lantern, like a more modern lantern we might take camping. Maybe the version started with lit lanterns. And since the bridegroom took so long, it's his fault.

[7 : 25] If he would have been on time, I would have had enough oil. But he was delayed, and so the oil that I brought ran out. But that's not exactly what we should picture. Instead, picture something like a clay teapot.

And maybe the image of a teapot is lost on some of us these days, even not a Keurig, a teapot. A clay teapot, and it's smushed. Actually, the image that whoever chose that picture as the backdrop for the sermon slide did a great job.

It's like a smushed teapot. There's a bowl where the oil would go into, and then a spout. And you insert some type of a wick into the spout, and the wick would go into that bowl of oil, and you'd light the wick.

Yeah, yeah, perfect. Like a smushed teapot, something like that. And the text tells us, not that the foolish virgins took some oil, and it's the bridegroom's fault that he took so long, and what they brought along ran out.

The text tells us that they brought no oil. Verse 3 tells us, they took their lamps, but with them no oil. What good is a lamp without oil?

[8 : 36] In fact, what foolishness to bother carrying fragile clay lamps with you if it's going to be of no use when it gets dark.

Maybe these foolish virgins thought oil would be provided at the celebration. Oil would come later. And as a result, they're left holding an empty duffel bag.

And so all this time, these five have been indistinguishable from the others. They lived the right way. They dressed the right way. They talked the right way. They went the right way.

When the bridegroom does return, they are finally and finally separated from the others. There's a mad scramble for oil, worry.

Perhaps their wicks contain just enough oil to burn momentarily like an empty tiki torch lights briefly. But what they come up with won't be enough. Anxiety. This oil can't be shared.

[9 : 37] There's a master lock on the bag. Lonely. There's an argument among friends. No peace. They rush to the business's expense.

They rush back to the celebration. Exhausted. Will there be enough time? The foolish virgins experience the anxiety of an unprepared life.

And who of us doesn't feel the anxiety and worry of living unprepared? You could imagine the panic my dad might have felt if he grabbed that softball bag on a Thursday night, made the trip to the

diamond, logged it to the bleachers, only to find the bag empty.

It's a panic I know well. On three different occasions, I wore a JV player's shoes because I had forgotten to bring mine to an away game. One time I forgot my jersey entirely. Perhaps you've rushed, shipped an Amazon order, or felt the anxiety of delivering an ill-prepared presentation. That anxiety dial is turned to 11 when we're talking about meeting Jesus. Many of us know that anxiety all too well.

[10:51] All of us have known it at some point, I'd be willing to guess. We are waiting for the bridegroom. And waiting produces anxiety and worry in us because we're well acquainted with what it's like to show up unprepared.

Now, if all it took to be prepared was to look outwardly like the rest of the disciples, many of us would be indistinguishable. We live the right way, doing our best not to lust, avoiding drunkenness, attending the right schools and churches.

We talk the right way, choosing oh my goodness and H-E double hockey sticks instead of the worst four-letter words. Even dropping in the occasional theological term to pepper our conversation. Indistinguishable. The bag looks cool and vintage. But is our bag empty? Is there oil in the lamp? Now, oil throughout the Bible, Old and New Testament, can represent an awful lot.

Perhaps we can get closest to what Jesus means in choosing oil as an image in his parable. By saying, it represents here not only the presence of the Holy Spirit.

[12:00] Not only the presence of the Holy Spirit. But also the anointing and blessing that come with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps oil here represents not only the presence of the Holy Spirit, but also the anointing and blessing that come with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We might be familiar with the wonderful promise that those who repent and put their faith in Jesus receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, a promise guaranteeing our inheritance in heaven.

Yes. Yes. The presence of the Holy Spirit is a future blessing for us. Guaranteeing a future home. But the gift of the Holy Spirit is not only future. With the Holy Spirit comes anointing or special work. Anointing and blessing.

Heddleberg Catechism question and answers 31 and 32 get at the important reformed idea of anointing. Answer 31 tells us that Christ was anointed to the special work of prophet, priest, and king.

[13:15] He is our chief prophet and teacher because he perfectly reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God. He is our only high priest who has set us free and who continually pleads our case.

He is our eternal king who governs us, guards us, and keeps us in his freedom. Christ is our prophet, priest, and king. And then answer 32, the next question and answer, surprises us with the fact that we share in his anointing.

As prophets, we confess his name. As priests, we present our whole lives as offerings of living sacrifice and thanks. As kings, we march against the forces of spiritual evil as co-regents with Christ over all creation.

Not only does the gift of the Holy Spirit bring with it this incredible anointing, the Holy Spirit also brings myriad blessings to us. Spiritual power, joy, peace, abundance, healing, to name only a few. Yet sadly, too many of us have fallen for the lie that the sanctified life is for later. Joy, that comes later.

[14:37] Peace, only after I die. The good news, good news starts when Jesus comes back. Oil will be provided at the feast. In the meantime, the best we can do is to look outwardly like we belong.

So we live the right way, we say the right things, toiling away until we finally hurry ourselves into a ball of anxiety. Darkness comes, and we are not prepared to handle it.

Brothers and sisters, praise God that Jesus has given us another example. Though the foolish virgins experience the anxiety of the unprepared life, the wise virgins are equipped and prepared. They take oil for oil lamps. What's more, verse 4 tells us that they took flasks, plural, along with their lamps.

These virgins are prepared for the darkness they know is coming, and they are abundantly prepared. It's interesting, it's noteworthy, that Jesus chooses the Greek word *phronimos* to describe these women as wise.

[15:55] The word biblical authors typically use for the virtue that we call wisdom, the ideal of wisdom, is the word *sophia*. And instead, Jesus chooses the word *phronimos*.

It's the same word that he uses to encourage the disciples to be wise as serpents in Matthew 10, 16. Maybe you know it, it's shrewd as serpents in Matthew 10, 16.

I've translated phronimos in the past as street smart. It's the kind of everyday wisdom you get from experience. It's that common sense we wonder if anyone has anymore.

And I want us to realize how truly common this all is. Oil for oil lamps? These wise virgins aren't prepared because they have gold for entrance into the feast.

They haven't paved their way. These virgins aren't prepared because they've stumbled upon a secret password that lets them in the door. They haven't had to climb Mount Everest to meet a talking eagle who leads them into a hidden crevice where a mystical tree, which blooms only but once a century, produces a fruit whose oil burns eternally.

[17:12] No. They brought regular oil for regular oil lamps. These five virgins, like the rest, heard about a wedding feast.

A wedding feast? Just how exciting. They put on their wedding clothes and their dancing shoes and on the way out of their thatched roof home, stopped at the shelf just inside the front door.

The sun is still high, beating on the mud brick courtyard walls. It will be dark soon, they say to themselves, grabbing their lamps and a few flasks of oil as commonly as you and I put a wallet in the back pocket and a phone in the front.

They set out, a group of ten indistinguishable from one another. Perhaps it never even occurred to the wise virgins that some in the group hadn't taken oil at all.

Why wouldn't they have? When the night doesn't go quite as planned for these street-smart virgins, the sun begins to set, darkness comes.

[18:18] The bridegroom is late, really late. They'd hoped to be awake, to greet him when he returns. At one point were so excited to meet the bridegroom, but now it's 10 p.m., 11 p.m., and they've fallen asleep.

And yet, I think you and I know something of the peace these street-smart sisters felt as they're woken up so abruptly by the cry, here is the bridegroom!

Come out to meet him! You know that comfort. The way it feels when the boss asks for information you've already got neatly prepared in a folder at your side.

When a student asks a question you address in the next slide of your presentation. When the TSA agent hollers at you to take off your shoes and you've already put them in the bin with your electronics.

You know that feeling when you're ready, when you're prepared. Only the comfort dial is turned to 11 when we're talking about meeting Jesus.

[19:28] The wise virgins are equipped and prepared, and Jesus uses them as an example to plead with us to live prepared for his return.

Let's be clear. There's a very serious tone that Jesus takes in this parable. His command finally comes in verse 13. Watch, therefore.

this really matters. It's of eternal significance. Imagine my dad grabbing his softball bag and heading out to the diamond, but never changing into his baseball cleats or putting on his glove. Brothers and sisters, the good news is that Jesus has handed you a packed bag with everything you need. As common as oil is for an oil lamp, so common is the sanctified life from a sanctified child of God.

Jesus has not only paid the price for your and my sin by suffering our penalty on the cross, but he's also given us the grace of the sanctified life.

[20:47] Good news is for today. Joy is for today. Peace, hope, love, and comfort are for today. The wise virgins got their street smarts through experience, and we learn the sanctified life the same way.

In his work, Confessions, St. Augustine details how his life of ambition and hard work and ladder climbing led to an internal exhaustion and near crippling anxiety.

It was later in life, on vacation with friends, randomly flipping through a Bible that was on a coffee table, St. Augustine came to a passage in Romans, and his heart was finally, and finally, overwhelmed by the gospel.

What Augustine found was not only forgiveness for those sins that required confessing, but a life, new life with Christ, so much greater than his political and academic achievement ever offered.

James K.A. Smith summarizes it well. Grace isn't just forgiveness, a covering, an acquittal. It's an infusion, a transplant, a resurrection, a revolution of the will and wants.

[22 : 15] It's the hand of God that made you and loves you, reaching into your soul with the gift of a new will. Grace is freedom.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is not only future blessing. It's blessed life with Christ. And the blessings of the Holy Spirit, the blessings of the Holy Spirit we've listed are nearest when we live our anointing, when we worship and serve our Savior as prophets, as priests, as kings.

It's then we enjoy the blessings of life with Christ. Christ, Jesus does not here demand something significant from us.

He hasn't asked us to do something we're incapable of. We are incapable of seeking our own way to God. And so, like the wise virgins, we wait for Him.

We are incapable of doing good enough to earn our way in. We too have embarrassingly fallen asleep. We can't avoid the trials and temptations of life now.

[23 : 35] Everyone experiences darkness, lies and foolish alike. Jesus has only asked us to do what He, by His Spirit, has already equipped us to do.

The bag is packed. There's oil in your lamp. Thanks be to God for our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Pray with me. God, we desire to be prepared disciples.

and we thank You that packing the bag, that being prepared, that having lit lamps is not the result of some special effort on our part.

We thank You for the work of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins, and the new life He grants to each and every one of us, who has turned from our sins, and put our faith in Him.

And we thank You that salvation is total and full, and it affects not just our spiritual state before You, but You care about our bodies and our minds and our wills and our relationships and our emotions.

[25 : 00] We thank You for the Holy Spirit and the anointing and the blessings that come with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We ask now that You would inspire us to experience the sanctified life by beginning to try, to try to follow as prophets, priests, and kings.

Not because, not because we're earning it, but because You've already given it to us. Pray that our lamps aren't something we keep hidden under a bushel, but something that we lift up on a hill for all to see.

inspire us to do what You've called us to do, to worship Jesus and to follow Him with our whole good.

It's in His name we pray. Amen.