

Why waiting matters

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 January 2019

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] So, we're in Matthew 25, in the first 13 verses. And this is a parable that Jesus gave to his church of five, ten women, five of whom ten virgins, five of whom who are wise, and the five of whom who are not so wise.

So, Matthew 25 and the first 13 verses together, now hear God's word. 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 of them 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 and meet him.

Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.

[1 : 25] And while they were going to buy, 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.

Afterwards, 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 neither know the day nor the hour. And of course, neither know the day nor the hour that the Lord will come.

Whilst preparing this, we're going to sing before we come back to this. But whilst preparing this, I had this feeling that came upon me every time I read the passage and every time I sat down to write, what if the Lord does halfway through preparing this?

Or what if the Lord does halfway through proclaiming it on the Sunday evening? And I was thinking, that would be good. But Lord, you could save me a good 15 hours here if you just let me know ahead of time.

[2 : 34] Which hasn't happened. So, we're going to sing, and then we're going to come back to it together this evening. Your water's tea, is that all right? It was the one over there.

I've got none here, so. Excuse me. Ever since I had that problem last year, where all my hair fell out, if I don't have a sip to drink before I start, my kidneys start to hurt before I get to the third point.

And I'd be saying it like this. So, Matthew 25. And it is a parable.

And therefore, there has to be a very simple explanation to be given when you deal with parables, simply to lay the foundation so that minds and hearts don't go drifting.

So, very, very simply, this is what each represents. The bridegroom is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ. The virgins are, of course, those who are waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to return.

[3 : 42] The oil in this situation is not the Holy Spirit, though often oil in Scripture does relate to the Holy Spirit, but not in this case.

And the reason being is because you cannot run out of the Holy Spirit. Okay? So, if you apply point for point, you end up with a problem. So, you know that the oil in this situation cannot mean the Holy Spirit, because oil is something that these don't have.

Or it could be in reference to that, but it would make it very, very difficult then to spell out the parable. So, in simple terms, the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back, and nobody knows when he's going to come back.

The situation is that we must be ready for the marriage feast. And so, when Christ comes back, there is going to be a marriage taking place. So, in glory, everybody's single and everybody's married.

That's one of the glorious things about glory. Everybody's single in the sense that they're no longer married to anybody else as they were on earth. But everyone is married to Christ.

[4 : 49] Christ marries his church. Okay? And so, this parable was sort of telling us about the future of what will happen.

Okay? That's the sort of foundation or the groundwork out the way. The other things that parables do is they don't always answer the questions that you have of them. So, you might want to ask a question of this parable, and the parable just refuses to give you the answer.

Not because there isn't an answer elsewhere, but because the point of the parable is to get you to focus on one of its main points. And the main point here is, don't be caught missing when Christ returns.

Be ready. Be watchful. Be alert for the return of Christ. Do you, that's the thing that matters the most here. That we're to live every day as if Christ could return today.

And so, you say, well, what does that look like? Should I, should I pack a bag? Should I not go to work today? Should I, what should I do and not do? Should I, should I do my Asda shop? Because it would, it won't arrive until Thursday.

[5 : 57] How am I supposed to plan that out? No, you carry on as normal, but you carry on as normal being watchful. In the sense that you are, you are always ready for the Lord's return.

Okay? That just kind of, that I'm ready to go, Lord. I'm just ready to go. Now, the Lord may not come for another 3,000 years, but that doesn't change the point. Okay?

That doesn't change the point. And if we truly believe that God's will on earth is being done as it is in heaven, we can almost recognize, when we look at the world, there's a lot of time still to take place.

Because there's still a lot of work to be done, whatever that may be, of course. The parable then draws our attention in a particular way, not to rights and wrongs, or repentance and belief, or unbelief and believers, in that kind of way.

It draws our attention to advantages and disadvantages. That it is possible for a person to disadvantage themselves before God. Even though they have every opportunity to live an advantageous life by listening to the words of Jesus, it is possible to go through life and disadvantage yourself more than once, perhaps a dozen times or whatever it may be.

[7 : 17] Other parables might draw your attention to the need of repentance and belief. And other parables, again, might draw your attention to the difference between what is right and what is wrong.

This parable tends to work more like Jesus' statement. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

And the point of that is, there's a way to advance yourself in the world. There's a way to have great advantage in the world, in the world's eyes, that will automatically disadvantage you before God.

Okay, so there's a way to become advantaged in the world that disadvantages you before God. You can gain the whole world, but what advantage is that? What profit is that if when you've done that, you've forfeited your whole soul?

You've given yourself away, which is so much of a quality, higher and of more value. You've brought the disadvantage that you now live with upon yourself.

[8 : 25] And this parable here works exactly in that kind of way. What type of person are you? Are you one that makes decisions that advantages you eternally?

Or are you a person that makes decisions that actually leads to your disadvantage in the fact that you've made wrong decisions or that you've not made the decisions you should have done?

So here's the sort of summary of how it unfolds. Number one, Jesus is clearly pointing out that this is about the kingdom of heaven, about the return of Christ.

The picture of the bridegroom and the virgins is a future picture of what we will see in Christ in his church. The marriage is going to happen. Jesus Christ is coming back for his people.

And his people will increase every single year he doesn't come back. I want you to think about that. Okay? The longer Jesus takes to come back, however long it's going to be, that means that every day there's an opportunity for a man, woman, boy and girl to come to Christ.

[9 : 30] Okay? So in one sense, don't come back, Lord. Okay? And in another sense, when you've had a tough day, can you make it this evening? Okay? So we all feel like that because we know how tough it is to live in the world, but we recognize the importance of Christ not coming back yet because of the importance placed upon men and women repenting and believing and turning to the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we keep reading in Matthew, we begin to see a picture of the separation of the sheep and the goats. And there's other separations that take place throughout other parables.

But this separation here happens out of ten women, five are human wise, the other five are foolish. But we don't know that if we only looked at the women.

The only reason we know that they're wise and unwise is because we're told that at the beginning of the parable. In many ways, if we were only told it at the end, we would think that all ten women at the beginning are exactly the same.

In fact, they do exactly the same. When you look at them through your natural eyes, they don't appear any different than any of the other that are there.

[10 : 48] But Jesus begins to bring a switch in the way that he tells this parable in that they're not just foolish and wise, but they are known and unknown.

Okay, so in the parable you have five who are wise, five who are foolish, which becomes apparent by their actions and inactions. And then that changes in verse 12 where Jesus says the words, But he answered, Truly I say to you, I do not know you.

So now these women have another distinction and that is five are known and five are not known by Jesus. And there's no reason for them to not be known other than the reasons that become evident.

So the distinction becomes clearer and clearer the more you move through the parable. Okay, so what does it teach? Well, one of the things it teaches, which we will pick up on again in a moment, is that there are two ways to learn.

And there are two places in which that learning takes place. And that's something which we can dip into in a little bit more in a moment. But let's just begin with a general observation.

[12 : 03] Ten women, all of which are waiting for Jesus. All of which who are waiting for the bridegroom to return. They're exactly the same in their waiting.

They're waiting. And so the sadness of the situation only appears over time because, as I've always said, and as Psalm 37 clearly teaches, that time and truth go hand in hand.

It is something that we cannot escape. It is something that God has built into his creation and into his covenantal world. That time and truth go hand in hand.

That given enough time, given enough time, the truth will always come out. It will always work its way out. God has a way of always separating things and directing things.

And this is just a parable of that very thing happening. The ten women at the beginning, you can't really tell the difference between them. But given a little bit of time, the truth becomes apparent.

[13 : 01] So let's look at it this way. Ten women go out to wait for the bridegroom. We can't tell any difference. All ten were waiting. And all ten fell asleep.

All ten took lamps. And all ten took lamps that were burning. Now, of course, there is a distinction because some took oil while the others didn't. But at that level, there is no difference.

There's no difference whatsoever. They're all waiting for the bridegroom to come. But Jesus wants us to know, what is it that makes five wise and five foolish when they're both, or rather, when all ten are doing the same things?

How are you supposed to tell the difference when they all look as if they're doing the same thing? They're all going to church, let's say. They're all praying the same kind of prayers. What kind of change are we looking for if the outward observation looks the same?

And this is where Jesus drives home his point. And so this is where we move on. According to Jesus, lost opportunities cannot always be regained. Ten women are waiting for Jesus, but only five go to be with him.

[14 : 14] And it's an opportunity that all ten have, but only five actually receive. And that opportunity lost by the other five is not regained, verse 12.

I don't know you. You can't come in. And there is the sadness of the situation. The sadness of the situation is you've got ten waiting and only five that actually move into the house.

And this is what Jesus says, that as the virgins say, well, we don't have enough oil. Can you lend us some of yours to the other five? And the other five say, yeah, we understand what you're asking for.

The trouble is, is if we lend you our extra resources, then basically there's not enough for us. So now we're all in the same situation. Okay?

It means that they would have half the amount. And so everyone would have half the amount that they needed. And then all ten would miss out. No, we can't lend you. Why don't you go off back into town to the dealers and buy some more?

[15 : 17] Now, of course, there's lots in these parables that doesn't make sense. Who? Who is going to be selling oil at nighttime? And I think it's a fair assumption to say it's nighttime because they have lamps and they need oil so that they can have light.

And so what comes to mind is another parable about this issue of midnight. You know, a friend goes to a friend at midnight and he has to wake him up. That the sheer inconvenience of being found unprepared, perhaps.

Who knows? And that's what we have here. Anyway, they get what they want. They come back. They realize that the bridegroom has already come and five have gone off and the marriage feast has already begun.

And so they go knocking on the door. For some reason, they find where it's taking place. They knock on the door. And the answer is this. But he answered, verse 12, The opportunity that was there for 10 has been lost by five and cannot be regained by them.

And that's the sadness of the situation here. That all 10 were waiting, but only five received into this marriage supper of the lamb, as it were.

[16 : 38] You know, this marriage with Christ when he returns. So when Jesus uses the word know here, it's not just about knowledge. Jesus is not just saying, I don't know you.

What he's saying is, there is no relationship here. And we see this all the way through Matthew and others, and even in the Old Testament, that whenever God uses the word know, he's not referring to knowledge.

God knows everything. What he's referring to is relationship. When he says, I don't know you, it's not that he's not aware of who you are or how old you are or what you do. He's saying, we're not together.

We're not in relationship. So in the Old Testament where it says, Jacob knew his wife. Okay? It's a very good way of explaining something that you know that happens between a married couple without going into the details.

There's no need to go into the details. You just use a word like knew, and everybody gets the picture. Okay? That level of intimacy. But in the same way, the word know here is doing exactly the same thing.

[17 : 44] There's not an intimate relationship between the bridegroom who has returned and those who have been found without oil and have come back.

So how did the bridegroom know? How did the bridegroom know who were truly his and who weren't? Or to put it another way, from a minister's point of view, how do you prepare people to be prepared for the coming of Christ?

What do you have to do to make sure men and women, boys and girls in the church do not disadvantage themselves through their own actions or through their own inactions?

If the opportunity is available for 10, okay, then how can you make sure that all 10 are ready and waiting and eager for the bridegroom?

How do you overcome this foolishness that five of them had? And as a pastor, that's what I'm concerned about. I don't want anybody to be disadvantaged by their own actions.

[18 : 50] Imagine it this way, that if you forgot your coat and you went out and it began to rain, okay, you may not have thought ahead. You may not have looked at the weather. But the consequence isn't really that bad.

You get wet. You may get a cold and by God's grace, let's hope you wouldn't get anything else. But there's a thing. Imagine a pupil who's about, I don't know, you know, they're about to take a math exam.

And the pupil turns up and the teacher looks at him and goes, you haven't got a pencil. You haven't got a pen. There's no ruler. You've not got a calculator. You've not got anything that you need.

Do you think the teacher would be fair in saying to them, have you not thought about what you've come to do? Have you not thought about what you've come to do? So there's the situation that you have.

If people are not thinking about that, then what they do here changes because they don't do anything. Okay? They're not ready for that then because if they were, it would change the type of decisions that they'd be making back here, over here in the present.

[19 : 58] And that's what Jesus is getting to hear. That the reason these five women were caught out in the end is because their minds were never on the end.

They may have just saw five women get up and go with lamps and think, hey, that's a good idea. The bridegroom's coming. We better do the same. And we see that in some of the other parables, this kind of following.

A lady by the name of Miriam Joseph, who you've probably never heard of because she's gone to glory. I was reading her books on how people learn.

And I was learning a lot reading her book. And it's a shame because, you know, she's gone to glory years ago. And you think a book like this is going to be buried. How many people are going to read it now?

And it's a real shame. And so another lady brought it back from the dead, let's say, sort of republished it. And I'm like, this is good stuff. She makes a clear distinction between how people learn.

[21 : 06] And it has a direct sort of impact on this parable. This parable picks up on exactly the same things that she is saying. And of course, because she's a Christian, she's probably informed by scripture largely when it comes to education as well.

And this is the distinction that she makes. And I have to paraphrase because, of course, I'm not going to be able to get everything that she said in this particular chapter on learning down this evening.

But this is what she says. There's a difference in the way people learn in that some learn and they are changed and some learn the task is changed. And what she says is people can learn in two ways.

They can either learn to perform a task, i.e. get the lamp, get the oil, get stuff ready. Or they can learn in such a way where they're always prepared mentally to know what they need for the future ahead of themselves.

In other words, wisdom is thinking what you'll need 10 steps ahead before you'll actually need it. And this is how she plays it out. And I'm sort of paraphrasing. She says, imagine it this way.

[22 : 14] Christianity is not a subject that can be taught in the same way perhaps some other subjects can, like carpentry. And I think she picks on carpentry because Jesus is a carpenter.

And this is the distinction she makes. She says, when a person learns carpentry, you get to see the changes of their carpentry on the random pieces of wood becoming a beautiful table or a beautiful chair.

But if that person was an atheist making that, they remain an atheist afterwards. If you've got an atheist sanding wood, the sanding of the wood doesn't change them.

It cannot convert them. If you've got them chiseling out or filing down or with a saw or a bow saw or whatever it is that they're doing, the change is happening on the external, the task that they are performing.

You can't teach Christianity like that. Because Christianity demands that the change happens in the person who's learning. So there's two ways to learn.

[23 : 19] You can learn to pass an exam and then forget what you've learned a year later. Hence why many people will say, I'm terrible at math, but English was okay. Okay. We're comfortable with saying we're bad at math probably because all of us just did enough to get through the exam.

Okay. Because what we were doing is we're doing exactly what she said. We're simply learning to perform a task, not to actually change our mind to think mathematically.

We're simply doing it to perform a thing over here. And of course the amount that you use it. English you use all the time, hence why you're good at it, hopefully.

So what does it mean when it comes to a subject like this parable? Well, one of the things that is pointed out that's clearly obvious is that the women who are prepared are prepared internally, not just externally.

They don't just have the lamp and the oil and the ability to wait. They fell asleep just like the five foolish women did. Okay. What they had was the ability to think ahead.

[24 : 27] What they had was the wisdom to think that if the bridegroom is delayed, he can be delayed further. And therefore we will take extra supplies. Why? Because we know how important it is to not miss.

This is something that if we miss it, we won't regain it. And so one of the things that comes out of this parable is how you as a Christian live your life now.

Now, if Jesus came back and you didn't know when it was going to be, just exactly you don't know when it's going to be, what difference is it making to you now?

Well, it's not going to make any difference to you packing a suitcase because that doesn't matter. The question is, are you ready? Are you ready at any point, mentally, spiritually, ready for the return of Christ?

The difference in these virgins is not found in the fact that they all had lamps or that some had lamps and some didn't. They all had lamps. Neither is it found in the fact that they didn't know that their lamps needed oil.

[25 : 35] Every single one of the virgins knew that their lamps needed oil. The difference is found in the fact that some of them were thinking ahead. Some of them had their mind on the return of Christ and not wanting to miss it.

All ten had the external objects, but only five of them had the internal wisdom that was needed to think about the importance of the return of Christ.

In other words, Christianity changes the person on the inside. And this is why this parable is so incredibly enlightening, because all the women look exactly the same.

They all do exactly the same. The difference that is being pointed out in this parable is that five of them knew how to wait. And five of them were ready, waiting for the Lord's return.

Hence his comment, verse 13. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. And of course, the import is of when Christ will return. What it means then is Christ does not want you to be a person where you lead yourself into your own disadvantages.

[26 : 56] Don't disadvantage yourself when the opportunity for you to be there is exactly the same as it is for everyone else. The opportunity is the same, but five of them disadvantaged themselves by their own actions.

And the sadness is that it was such a disadvantage that the opportunity was lost and was not regained. It was not regained. Imagine two children then, if I can give a simple illustration as we sort of wrap this up, going into, let's take a mass exam again.

But on the one hand, Bill, let's say, has studied for a good year for this exam. But Daniel, let's say, on the other hand, just takes a pencil.

Who do you think is going to do well? See, the difference is not whether or not I have all the right things, the nice shiny Bible with a gold trim.

It's not whether or not I wear the nice clothes or even attend church in this capacity or pray. The issue is, where is the change taking place?

[28 : 07] Is it taking change external to me in that I just happen to be in the right place at the right time? I can happen to stand up and sing with the rest of you. I can sit down and pray with the rest of you.

I can go through the motions of buying a Bible and even reading a Christian book. But if all my learning is executed in the tasks and not in me, then I'm no different than I was before I did all of those things.

And that's the point that Christ is making here. The difference between the women is not found in the fact that they were different kind of women or they had different kind of lamps.

It's found in the fact that some, five, were ready for the return of Christ and five were not. The I do not know you highlights the same thing that many of the other parables highlight.

The wheat and the tares, distinction between two. The good fish and the bad fish and the separation. Distinction between two. The sheep and the goats. Again, distinction between the two.

[29 : 12] Over and over again, Christ points out that distinctions become apparent either over time or they are immediately apparent. And the lesson here is this.

That this isn't about being right or wrong. This isn't about repentance and unbelief or belief or whatever. This is about you as a believer waiting for the return of Christ, not disadvantaging yourself through your own actions or inactions.

Why? Because time and truth go hand in hand. That in some situations that it's only in time does the truth come out. And so we have a responsibility to make sure that as we study the things of God, that we study them from an eternal perspective.

That we don't disadvantage ourselves and think, well, I've done this in the church for 40 years. I must be going to heaven. That is if all our Christianity must take place out there.

And I am really thankful to God for those people who serve in such a way where you get to see the visible product of their Christianity. Whether it be in building a church or serving on the doors or playing the piano.

[30 : 22] I'm thankful for all of that. But more importantly is the change that has to take place inside of you. That's where the readiness is. Why? Because it's found in this word, no.

I do not know you. It's telling us that these women did not know Jesus. The change hadn't occurred. Everything else was the same.

But the change in relationship had never happened. And that's the importance here. Amen.