

# *The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...*

## *Part 8 – Unblessed Assurance*

Matthew 25:1-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 26, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup>but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup>But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ <sup>7</sup>Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup>But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ <sup>10</sup>And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup>Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ <sup>12</sup>But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ <sup>13</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25:1-13, NRSV)

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The very first thing we must do in order to understand this parable is set aside our modern, Western image of weddings. Jesus’ parable is depicting a 1<sup>st</sup> century wedding in Palestine, an event that would have had very little in common with the last wedding you attended. No rings. No bouquets. No white gowns or tuxedos. No DJ or three-tiered cake. No best man or maid of honor. I know the text calls the women bridesmaids, but even that is an inaccurate translation, likely motivated by political correctness.

These ten women are virgins. That’s the literal translation. Do not picture ladies in matching dresses holding daisies and standing in line next to the bride. No, these are simply unmarried women, perhaps friends or relatives of the bride, or maybe even servants of the bridegroom. In the end, scholars aren’t exactly certain what role such women would have played, only that they would have gathered to in some way help celebrate the occasion. What does seem clear is that at some point during the wedding festivities there would be a procession through the village, a procession that often occurred at night. After the marital vows were spoken at one location, perhaps at the bride’s home, the couple would then be paraded through town on their way to the groom’s house where the two of them would go inside and consummate the marriage while all the guests literally waited just outside the door. After that the couple would emerge and the wedding feast would begin, a feast which might last even a week or more.

Weddings in our day often run like clockwork. They have to. Photos at 11:00. Guests arrive at 2:30. The ceremony must begin at 3:00 because the caterer will have dinner ready at 5:30 and the DJ is only booked until 10:00. I’ve been to hundreds of wedding and they almost always run on a tight schedule. Not so in the ancient Middle East. In fact, not so in the Middle East even today, or in much of the non-Western world. I once went to an Ethiopian wedding reception that was scheduled to begin at 6:00. We arrived on time and by ourselves. The reception eventually began at 9:30, a fact which surprised nobody but us. Since we’d scheduled to relieve our baby sitter by 10:00 we watched the bride and groom make their entrance and then left.

In a similar way, there is no tight schedule at the wedding in Jesus’ story. In fact, the delay in Jesus’ parable would not have surprised his listeners, even though it appears to be extensive. People fell asleep waiting for the groom to show up! It could have been hours, even a whole day. We don’t know. What we do know is that when the bridegroom does finally arrive, perhaps to meet his bride or maybe with her already by his side, these ten women, along with others, were then to join the couple on their parade through town, a parade which likely would take the longest route as a way to garner as many glad wishes as possible. Because it was nighttime, everybody would have been expected to have brought a lamp, along with plenty of fuel to account for possible delays and extra-long parade routes. In fact, those without a lamp would have assumed to be party crashers or even bandits, and would have been excluded from the festivities.

With this setting in mind, let's focus on Jesus' parable, a parable he uses to paint a picture of the Kingdom of God, a picture he then intends we will use as a mirror to see how our own lives conform, or fail to conform, to this Kingdom. That will then give us a window through which we can envision what someday might be.

Consider these ten women who stand at the center of this Kingdom picture. In most every way they are identical. They are all unmarried virgins. They all have gathered in the same location, for the same celebration, to wait for the same bridegroom. They all brought the same lamps. They all fall asleep at the same time as they wait together. There is only one difference, a difference that a casual observer on the scene likely would not even have noticed. Half of them have brought extra oil and half of them have not. This singular and seemingly slight difference, however, is crucial for it tells us that half of them are wise and half of them are fools.

How many of you tend to procrastinate, even with important things, right up to the deadline? Some of you who aren't raising your hands right now are sitting next to a person who really thinks you ought to be! It's a fact of life, some of us like to push things right up to the wire. We cram for the exam the night before we have to take it. We're scrambling with our tax returns on April 14<sup>th</sup>. We find ourselves picking through the leftovers in the mall on Christmas Eve. And while it's true that some people work well under pressure, even so it's probably not the best way to live.

But what if we didn't know the deadline? Would that change things, even for the most ardent procrastinator? What if you tried to wait until the last minute even though you didn't know when, exactly, the last minute was going to come? What if the teacher decided that the final exam, which is weighted so heavily that it counts for your entire final grade, could come at any time? What if the IRS told you that one of their agents would be showing up at your doorstep at some unannounced day between January and April and that at that time if you did not have your papers in order you would be carted off to jail for tax evasion? Wouldn't the uncertainty of the deadline motivate you to be prepared? Only a fool would risk so much on a roll of the dice.

That's what's going on here. These women know that the bridegroom is coming but they don't know when he will arrive. And when he comes they will need to have a burning lamp if they are going to participate in the feast which will ensue. Half of them bring extra fuel, plenty to last no matter when he comes. The other half, however, only bring a little. If the bridegroom shows up right away they're okay. But if he doesn't they are in trouble. He doesn't. And so they're in trouble.

Let me cut right to the heart of it. Invitation is not enough. Essentially, that's what Jesus is teaching us here. And it's not a new lesson but one he teaches over and over again, which can only mean that we must have a hard time learning it. You see, all these women were invited to the wedding feast. They were all included, or could have been included. But participation in the wedding is not just a matter of invitation but also a matter of preparation. In some specific way they had to act on the invitation. It reminds us of the parable of the wedding feast which Jim preached on last Sunday, specifically the part about the one guest who was invited to the wedding but did not dress properly and so found himself thrown out of the party.

This warning in Jesus' parable is directed to the church and it's not an easy warning for us to hear. This is a tough-love warning. Put simply, Jesus is making clear to us that there are two sorts of Christians in the church. Now, on the surface, both look identical. They both profess to believe the same things. They both show up on Sunday, sing in the choir, preach good sermons, serve on church committees, put money in the offering plate. Both have been baptized. Both go to Life Group. Certainly both are loved by God and have been invited by God into the life he wants for all people.

But beneath the surface there is one difference, one subtle but ultimately crucial difference. Some believers in the church don't really believe. Or, maybe more accurately, some believers only believe in their heads and not with their lives. Their decision to trust in Jesus has only been a half-decision. Or maybe it was a one-time decision that once burned brightly but has now dimmed over time.

You see, most every one of us here is here because at some point along the way we heard about Jesus and the feast of life he had invited us to attend and we were captivated, or at least intrigued. But believing there is a bridegroom and a wedding feast is not the same as doing whatever the bridegroom says is necessary in order to attend the feast. And over and over in Jesus' teaching he has made clear to us that participation in this feast requires more than just a profession of

faith. Faith must lead to action. Trust must be manifest in obedience. Specifically, of course, evidence of true faith is a life that increasingly resembles Jesus in the way we love God and others.

Again, this teaching is not unique to this one parable. As Jesus taught elsewhere, it's not enough to just find the treasure in the field; you must sell everything you own to possess it. It's not enough to just receive the seed of the gospel in the soil of your heart, that soil must be fertile enough to eventually produce a harvest from that seed. It's not enough to just receive the king's pardon for your debt, you must then turn around and pardon those who are indebted to you. It's not enough to just show up at the wedding feast, you have to come dressed in your proper wedding clothes.

Yes, God's grace and love and inclusion are free, but at the same time they will cost you everything. It's never enough to simply say you believe in Jesus, even sincerely, and then to imagine somehow your eternal ticket is punched for heaven someday. The Gospels never speak in these terms. Christ isn't asking for us to simply agree with him but also to follow him. Faith isn't just believing in something without proof, but is trusting in something, or someone, in a *participating* way. It's not just believing the chair will hold your weight but actually sitting down in the chair. Faith isn't only thinking with our minds but assenting with our whole lives.<sup>1</sup>

With that said, it would not be helpful at this point to be too specific. The church begins dispensing poisonous legalism when it does. We can't say, for instance, that unless you are giving this much money away, or spending this much time in your devotions, or avoiding these certain activities in your life, or voting, or dressing, or speaking this certain way that you are one category or the other. Remember, on the surface all the virgins looked identical. So do we. In fact, only God ultimately knows which of us belongs to the wise group and who among us is foolish and unprepared to meet him. Which means, by the way, that we shouldn't try to categorize one another. Ever. Remember, the picture of this parable isn't given so you can run around and shove it in the face of your neighbor you think needs to pay attention to it. This parable is a mirror, meant for you to hold it up to your own life, and for me to hold up to my life.

As you do you need to ask yourself this question. Do I trust Jesus to the extent that I've allowed him not only to change my mind but my life? This isn't about being perfect, of course. You and I will never be morally perfect in this life, not even close. But those of us who are wise, who truly have made Jesus the focus of our greatest affection and devotion, will begin to see our lives conformed to him. It can't help but happen. You always eventually know a tree by its fruit.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, once described genuine faith this way: "O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever."<sup>2</sup> Is this not the exact teaching of this parable, along with the teaching of many of these Kingdom parables we've looked at in this series.

Now, I understand that our reflex at this point may be to resent Jesus for such a hard word. But in truth, we ought to thank him. The saying is true that it's often only your best friends will speak truth to you that you do not want to hear. Jesus always gives it to us straight because he is the best friend we will ever have. He loves us enough to warn us when we need to be warned. Remember, a day is coming when we will meet him face to face. We do not know when that day will come. It might be today. It might be years from now. We don't know. But that future meeting will be the most important meeting of your life and you will want to be prepared for it when it comes.

I recently traveled out of the country and on that trip I met a lot of people along the way. You might say, however, that the most important meeting of the whole journey was the meeting I had with the customs agent in the glass booth at the San Francisco airport just after I arrived back home. At that meeting he was interested in what I had brought along with me. He wanted to make sure I didn't have any fruit or vegetables, that I wasn't carry excessive amounts of foreign currency, and that I hadn't picked up some bovine disease on a cattle ranch somewhere abroad. But most of all he wanted to make sure I had one thing: my passport. For that reason, I kept that document with me at all times on the trip, tucked in a travel pouch beneath my belt. I wasn't about to assume he'd let me back in the States because of my distinct American accent, or my San Francisco Giants t-shirt, or my impressive knowledge of Seinfeld trivia. No, I

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<sup>1</sup> I'm borrowing language here from the text notes on Romans 1:17 from *The Life With God Bible*, edited by Richard J. Foster (Harper, 1989), 266.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume II (Eerdmans, 1990), 545.

knew the only thing that would guarantee my entry was that up-to-date American passport with my name and photo inside. As long as I had that with me, I wasn't worried.

There's an old hymn we still sing once in a while called *Blessed Assurance*. Do you know it? Here are some of the lyrics:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine  
 O what a foretaste of glory divine  
 Heir of salvation, purchase of God  
 Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood

Perfect submission, all is at rest  
 I in my Savior am happy and blessed  
 Watching and waiting, looking above  
 Filled with His goodness, lost in His love

I believe this is what God wants for us, blessed assurance. Through Christ he has made a way for us to be saved – forgiven, restored, set free, washed clean, included. As we submit to him perfectly – that is, wholeheartedly – we can rest in the knowledge of his promises. No matter what circumstances we face in this life, Christ will ultimately set things right. And as we wait for him to do so, even if the waiting goes on and on, we don't have to wait with fear or uncertainty. Jesus doesn't want us to anxiously wonder each day if we are his beloved. He wants us to trust that we are, and to rest in that knowledge.

Notice the virgins in the story sleep as they wait for the bridegroom to arrive. This isn't a bad thing. We ought to be so blessed by our assurance that we can simply go about our lives as we wait for Christ to come. As C.S. Lewis once put it, when the end comes let us be found “doing sensible and human things – praying, working, teaching, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts [he was British remember] – not huddled together like frightened sheep.” As we wait for him to come, blessed assurance is what Jesus wants for us. As long as I've got my passport I'm not worried.

However, there is such a thing as unblest assurance. This exists among many in the church – maybe even half of us by Jesus' estimate – this foolish confidence that has wrongly convinced some that they are in Christ when, in fact, they are not. The teachings of the New Testament make at least one thing clear about the second coming of Jesus into our world, mainly that it will be full of surprise. Yes, the timing will be a surprise as he will likely come much earlier or much later than we think. But also there will be surprise for many who thought they were ready but who were really not ready at all.<sup>3</sup> Their assurance was anything but blessed.

Jesus' warning, given to us out of love, is that when that day comes it will be too late to change things. In the parable, when the bridegroom is announced, the foolish virgins wake up to realize their lamps have run out of oil and they have no surplus to relight them. When they ask the others to share, the others rightly point out that would be impossible. There's simply not enough to go around. They would if they could but if they did then all ten will run out of oil and all ten will be excluded from the feast.

Jesus' point here is that faith ultimately is personal and individual. None of us can ride on the coat-tails of somebody else's faith. Faith can't be borrowed. I tell my own kids this all the time. As their parents we will do our best to teach them the truth about Christ that they will see how much he loves and forgives them and realize the life he has in store for them. They cannot, however, enter the Kingdom on the family name. They must each choose to own, or disown as the case may be, faith in Christ. None of us can be saved on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. In the end, salvation, though nurtured and encouraged in community, is terrifyingly individual. When you stand to meet Jesus one day you will stand alone.

By the way, notice how the wise ones in the parable treat the foolish ones. There is no hint of judgment. No scolding or mocking. No “I told you so.” On the contrary, there seems to be genuine compassion as they urge their unfortunate counterparts to rush to the oil dealer and buy some for themselves before it's too late. The truth is that anybody who

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<sup>3</sup> There are so many of Jesus' parables that make this same warning. Two others in this same chapter in Matthew are included in that number – the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats and the Parable of the Talents.

would gloat in the divine judgment of another is likely revealing a heart that is in line to receive similar judgement. Like Jesus does, we should long for everybody to be saved and to do our best to work towards that end.

Still, in our compassion for others let us not be tempted to water down the truth, as so many are tending to do. There are, in fact, many in the church these days who want to soften teachings like this one, or even ignore or dismiss them. It's no easy feat, however, because the Bible, particularly the teachings of Christ himself, is just as full of warning and judgment as it is full of grace and love. In fact, you can't have one without the other. They are two sides of the same coin. And so even though this is a hard teaching, we must not flinch from it but stand under it. We must not read it the way we want to read it, but let it read us the way it wants us to be read. The most terrifying words that could ever be spoken to us in life or in death are these words from Jesus' lips, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Out of his undying love for us, Jesus warns us here while there is still time so that we might never have to hear these words.

But while we see here that there is so much to lose, let us not forget that there is also so much to gain.

This week I was thinking about the fact that Jesus so often uses weddings as metaphors to describe the Kingdom. I think I know why. While not all weddings are joyous events – I've been to a few, in fact, that we're painful – many of them can be. Think about it, when weddings are at their best, they include nearly everything we most cherish in this life.

I think my wedding day may have been the best day of my life. Here I was, marrying the girl of my dreams. She had said "Yes!" and was now about to commit herself to me, and I to her, body and soul, for the rest of our lives. In spite of the mullet I sported [this was 1992!], the pastor told us that we looked as good that day, standing there squeaky clean in tuxedo and wedding dress, as we would ever look for the rest of our lives. All the people I loved in this world had gathered for the occasion. The only other time they will do so will be at my funeral and I won't be there to enjoy them. The ceremony itself was glorious. And afterwards we all went off to a feast where we ate and drank like royalty. The music included all our favorites. The dance floor included the youngest and the oldest, all of whom danced until their feet ached. Laughter and love were infectious all night long. Nobody watched the clock. The only tears I saw, or cried, were tears of joy.

One of the dirtiest tricks the devil every played on us was to get us to think heaven is dull. Are we really going to find ourselves in the Kingdom wishing we had brought along the latest copy of *Sports Illustrated*? We didn't get this idea from Jesus.



According to Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a wedding feast. At that time we will find ourselves finally united with the One who has, all along, been the object of our heart's desire, the One who has given everything to set us free. We will also found ourselves surrounded by those we love and who love us, dear brothers and sisters, some previously separated from us for years, but with whom we will now share eternity.

In spite of how this life has gone, in that day we will appear glorious, having put on, body and soul, the righteousness of Christ which we will never have to take off again. The feast will be lavish, like nothing we have ever imagined. We will eat and drink like royalty because that is what we will be, beloved sons and daughter of our host, the King of Kings. And don't think there won't be dancing and music. There will be, like never before, along with laughter that never ceases, and tears full only of joy. And not only will nobody watch the clock, there will be no clock to watch. Time, along with sin, and pain, and suffering, and injustice, and even death, will have been forever swallowed up.

Do you realize that this is the feast, the life, the eternity, to which Jesus invites us in the Kingdom, to which he will come one day to take us? It is. Only a fool would not be ready for Him when he comes.

Amen.



## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 25:1-13 again. What first catches your attention in this parable?
2. The foolish ones in the parable took their lamps with them but no oil to burn in the lamps. Why would they do something so foolish?
3. When the foolish ones are locked out of the feast and knock to get in, the bridegroom says he doesn't know them. What is Jesus teaching us here?
4. What do you think the oil in the parable is meant to symbolize?
5. Why is it so important that we keep watch for the coming of Christ?
6. How specifically are you making sure you are ready to meet Christ when he comes to bring heaven to earth? Are you eager for that day to come? Why or why not?
7. It's been said that faith is not believing in something without proof but is trusting in a 'participating way.' Faith is not just thinking with our minds but assenting with our lives. Do you see the difference? Does this describe your faith?
8. As you hold this parable up as a mirror what do you see? What is one thing you hear Jesus saying to you in this parable? How does that change things?



#### **Table to Table Question**

*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

How can we get ready to meet Jesus when he comes back into our world some day?