

Be Prepared

Matthew 25:1-13

Introduction

Preparation:

- “A winning effort begins with preparation” (Joe Gibbs).
- “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail” (John Wooden).
- “To quote the great UCLA college basketball coach, John Obi-Wan Gandalf: ‘It is our choices, gentlemen, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities’” (Ted Lasso, Dumbledore).

Overlooked Aspect of Discipleship: One of the areas of discipleship that I find often missing is the importance of preparation and commitment. We are so enamored by giftedness that we often overlook daily patterns of character. Too often we are addicted to hype.

- Too often Christians have allowed the values of the world to determine our priorities in the church. We value celebrity over faithfulness and crowds over character.
 - This is not a takedown of celebrity pastors *per se* (consumers need to look in the mirror too). And I’m becoming more and more frustrated with the cottage industry of people who build pseudo-celebrity on the platform of tearing down celebrity pastors.
 - “A call to preach is a call to prepare or its just a desire to perform.”
 - That’s why we believe God is at work in the hours of preparation, not just in the moment of sermon delivery.
- You see a lot of folks chasing clout and influence, and cutting corners to do so. In these cases, there are folks who have influence without the character necessary to make their opinions wise (e.g., why do we want to hear from actors or athletes on elections, etc.?). I’m called to be a teacher (wisdom) not an influencer.
 - Notice that Jesus doesn’t jump straight into ministry but waits until he’s in his 30s.
 - Paul spent at least three years in study, spiritual growth before launching on his missionary journeys.
 - I think back to Noah building an ark in the desert when no one had even seen rain. How many of us would wait until we saw the rain to start obeying God and build the ark (too late I might add). Or we’d give up as soon as we realized the crowd was mocking us rather than joining us. Or we’d lose interest if God didn’t send rain quick enough (some speculate it took Noah decades to build the ark).
- In our impatience we can quench our availability to join God in his work. We can stunt our opportunities to grow and be prepared to fulfill God’s call on our lives (e.g., become a church worth planting; become a person worth marrying; etc.).

Prophecy Produces Preparation: Jesus’ prophecies about the end times are not a cause for speculation but are meant to motivate his followers to clear-minded discipleship. In this section we have three parables:

- (1) Wicked Servant: Wakefulness

- (2) Ten Virgins: Readiness
- (3) Talents: Work

We not just called to anticipate the coming of Christ, but to **prepare to persevere until he arrives.**

¹ “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ And 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. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The Parable: This parable, like all parables, teaches us a real truth about the KoG, but we have to be careful not to push the metaphor too far (or make the metaphor “walk on four legs” as one commentator described).

- There is quite a distance between us and the original context (in language and custom). We tend to overread our own marriage customs into a story like this when, in fact, we don’t know all that much about the marriage customs of 2TJ.
- Don’t get too hung up on the fact that there is no bride mentioned.
- Also, the term “virgins” (in this instance) is a near-synonym to “young women.” Many commentators describe these young women as “bridesmaids” (though we don’t know if they are part of the bride or groom’s family, it seems maybe the groom).
- The NT frequently describes Jesus as the bridegroom:
 - John the Baptist (Jn 3:29); Matt 9:15 (Mk 2:19; Lk 5:34); 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7; Rev 22:17; etc.
- The KoG(H) has already been *explicitly* compared to a wedding feast in Matt 22(:14): “many are invited but few are chosen.”
 - Wedding feast revelation 21:1-4: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” This is the end goal/hope.

Negative Example: There are **ten** young women in this parable, half are wise and half are foolish. We could ask the question in two directions: (1) what does it look like to be wise?

- James said last week that “knowledge is knowing tomato is a fruit and wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.” It reminds me of a similar saying about the classic Mary Shelley novel, *Frankenstein*: “Knowledge is knowing Frankenstein is not the monster, wisdom is knowing he is” (Frankenstein is the scientist, the creation is simply the “monster”).
- Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge and experience in the right way to produce the best results.

(2) But sometimes we learn more by seeing what *not* to do. We could also ask the question in the negative. What does it look like to be foolish? That’s what we’re gonna do today.

- In this passage, we learn that foolishness looks a lot like being unprepared. So we’ll see how these young women are “unprepared” for the arrival of the groom and, therefore, miss out on the wedding celebration.

Wise or Foolish: This isn’t the first time we’ve seen the “wise or foolish” comparison in this Gospel. In Matthew 7 Jesus compares the person who “hears [his] words and does them” to “a wise man who built his house on the rock” and, alternately, those who “hear [his] words and does not do them” to a “foolish man who built his house on the sand.” When the storm comes (which it inevitably does), the foolish man’s house is destroyed and the wise man’s house stands.

- There are so many parallels between that parable and the one in today’s passage.
 - Both hear the word, both want to build a house (in the Matt 7 parable), but only one prepares correctly (i.e., all the bridesmaids are invited to the wedding and *want to go*).
 - Both talk about what it looks like to prepare before the storm hits. What have you done before the problem arises?
 - Some things aren’t fixed in the moment but in the preparation. E.g., “There is no amount of relationship advice that can fix a relationship that shouldn’t exist” (Maliek Blade).
- “Many of us are building our lives on the sand close to the rock believing that when the storm comes we can just quickly move our house to the rock. Houses don’t work that way and neither can our faith” (Ike Miller).
 - Don’t be unprepared (not studied for the test, not going to cross country practice, etc.).
 - The question today is not about what you’ll do *when the time comes* but what you are doing now to prepare for that time!!
 - Readiness cannot be achieved by a last-minute adjustment.
- This is **not** meant to cause anxiety and doubt about your salvation but to cause each of us to honestly examine ourselves (fooling yourself is of no value to you or God). This is not necessarily about your **past profession but your current life of trust**.
 - The truth is good. It’s actually meant to give you confidence and assurance because you have built your life on the right things.

- You can't fool God and, I suspect, you're not fooling yourself (just avoiding cleaning out the junk drawer). Not looking at your bank account or credit card bill doesn't make it any better.

In what ways were these young women unprepared?

1. Not Prepared to Persevere

Delay: The issue is not the desire to be part of the Kingdom but the lack of perseverance to get there. The problem seems to be that these young women *want* to go but don't sufficiently prepare to handle an unexpected delay.

- They expected the journey to be easy, to go as they expected. As soon as the groom is delayed, they find themselves unprepared. They were not prepared to persevere, to make the journey if things don't go exactly as they want. They aren't prepared to make it through the night. They are only prepared for an easy journey. They want the party not the preparation.
- Many Christians find themselves in the same predicament. As long as following God goes smoothly, then we continue, but as soon as life is difficult, or God doesn't do what we think he should do, we give up. We want the gifts of God without surrendering our lives to him, we want him to bail us out of our problems without following his path and plan.
- If a perceived delay hinders our obedience then we were never there in the first place.
 - Jesus is calling us to be prepared even if the coming of Jesus is later than we think or expect (cf., "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed," 2 Peter 3:8-10).
- If God works in his own time and encourages us to patiently persevere, we should not seek hasty results. This is true of his second coming and true of every area of life and ministry. When evangelism, ministry, personal maturity, battles with sin and more take years instead of days, we should still trust him.
 - "Long obedience in the same direction" (Peterson).
 - "Become more like Jesus, not in 7 easy steps, but in 70 challenging years" (meme).

Count the Cost: They didn't bring enough oil for the delay. They didn't "count the cost." They didn't prepare to weather the difficulty. "Action before preparation usually spells disaster" (Stanley). *Notice in the story that everyone falls asleep but some were prepared for the delay. The point of *this* parable (unlike the others) is not about persistent watchfulness but sufficient preparation. E.g., camping in Rocky Mountain National Park (can't get Whitney to plant 😊) when the girls come to visit and didn't bring tents or supplies; I was left sleeping under a tarp,

waking up to a chipmunk nibbling the edge of my sleeping bag, just glad it wasn't a mountain lion. That kind of camping doesn't just happen, you pack supplies, food, fuel, etc.

Depth of Soil: The path of the cross requires us to count the cost of discipleship, plant our roots deep in the hope of the gospel, and trust the plan of God regardless of our own perception. We plan for unexpected delays, hardships, and detours. We develop character traits and spiritual disciplines to sustain us on the way. And, most importantly, the fuel for the journey is the indwelling Spirit of God, who fills, comforts, and guides us along the way.

- Jesus tells another parable (Matt 13:5-6), describing our lives as various types of soil that are either receptive or resistant to the gospel. One particular "type" describes a person who joyfully receives the word but it doesn't develop deep roots, so it withers as soon as any hardship comes along.
 - We need true and deep roots in the gospel. Width isn't gonna cut it.
 - We need hearts that are *deeply rooted* in Jesus, not just casually interested in his help. We need souls that are *deeply rooted* in Jesus, not just superficially connected to the cause of Christ (e.g., planting grass has been a challenge, it needs to be wet to germinate but if you *over water* the roots stay near the surface and won't grow deep). Faith can't be dependent on me or anyone else.
- In what ways have you not gone deep into the heart of God? In what ways has your faith been just "surface level"? In what ways have you not counted the cost?
 - Is there something in your life you're not willing to let go of?
 - Is there something God has called you to do but you're not willing to do?

2. Not Prepared to Act

Party Without Planning: All the young ladies in this parable *want* to go to the wedding feast. They want to show up to the party but they're unwilling to *do* what is necessary to get there. They want all of the privileges with none of the responsibility.

- Weddings don't just easily happen (e.g., decisions, color schemes, catering, etc.). And *attending* a wedding doesn't just happen, especially if it's a destination wedding (there won't be any wedding crashers in heaven). You have to RSVP, buy a gift, make travel arrangements, get a hotel, etc.
- If you're not willing to plan, you aren't really invested in the wedding.

Lip Service: Everyone seems excited for the wedding, but not everyone is spending their time preparing for it. Everyone seems happy that the groom is coming but they're wasting their time on other trivialities and frivolous things instead preparing to make the journey to meet him.

- Lots of people claim to be "Christian" but can't be bothered to *actually* follow Jesus. They want to be on team Jesus without showing up to practice or learning the plays. Their faith is nominal rather than real. It's in name only rather than in Spirit and truth.
 - Calling yourself a Christian or participating in some Christian activity isn't the same thing as knowing Christ and being known by him.

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord,

did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt 7:21-23).

- "There are good people who claim to follow Jesus as 'Lord' and who do good works and think they are doing them in Jesus' name who are nonetheless on the road to destruction" (France).
- Think about it: a lot of people *claim the name* of Jesus but all they're doing is slapping Jesus' name onto what they want to do. They're not in relationship with God (trip than the mission, friends than gospel community, crowds than cross, belonging to something than being ongoing to God). They're not known by God.
 - Obedience is not following a checklist of behaviors, it consists of the actions and attitudes that flow out of deep intimacy with Christ.
- Don't confuse mighty works, a dynamic ministry, or professed faith for genuine salvation.
 - God sees whether one's faith is real or fake and, if we look with patience and wisdom, we often can see whether faith is legitimate by where it is placed and whether it grows in the soil of grace to produce genuine, long-lasting gospel fruit.
- Plenty of people are excited about Jesus but their lives bear no reasonable mark of Christlikeness. They can sing and shout in church but their character and decisions during the week tell a different story. "It's not how high you jump when the Spirit hits you but how straight you walk when your feet hit the ground."

Not Enough Oil: The problem with the ill-prepared virgins is that they didn't bring enough fuel for their lamps and a lamp without oil is as good as a flashlight without batteries. They had *insufficient* fuel to keep the lamp burning.

- I think a lot of us have filled our lamps with the wrong fuel.
- We've filled it with our own morality or our religious traditions. We've filled it with a desire to be blessed with material provision or protected from hell. But all of these things, whether they are secondary benefits of the gospel or not, are not the source of our life. We are made alive by the Spirit of God regenerating our hearts and indwelling our lives.
 - If your torch is lit by anything other than the Spirit of God then it will burn out.

Who Gets Into God's Kingdom Party?: David Platt makes these observations (adapted).

- Simply responding to an invitation is not enough ("It's a much easier thing to walk an aisle than take up a cross," Dever).
- A profession of allegiance is not the same thing as a life of allegiance (**enough faith to like him but not enough to follow him**).
- Positive feelings and sentiments toward Jesus aren't enough.
 - Many will say they are followers and claim allegiance but will fall away. The KoG is for those who endure until the end.
 - Are you a "Christian" (social label) or a "disciple" (following the ways of Jesus)?
Has your faith gone beyond your lips to your life?

3. Not Prepared Personally

Grandma's Faith: One last point: they ran out of oil and thought they could just borrow some from someone else. As followers of Jesus, we are brought into a **community of faith**, the people of God, but we only get in on our own salvation. You can't borrow someone else's oil. It doesn't matter how godly your mom or grandma is, it is of no consequence whether your grandpa was a pastor or your father was a deacon. Just because Jesus knows them, doesn't mean he knows you.

- Jesus is not calling you to be a "fan" but a "follower" (as many people have noted).
 - "Every member is a full-time missionary." We don't want you to be a fan of RH but join the mission of God (e.g., Quarterback calls the play but the entire team must run it; some of you are on the sidelines, some of you are in the stands; we need you on the field, in the trenches).

Self-Awareness: A call to examine your own heart *honestly*. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb 3:8, 3:15, 4:7).

- Next week we'll be talking about how we work while we wait (not just "hanging in there"), but today we want to talk about our allegiance, our trust, our hearts.
 - If God is speaking to your heart, calling you to himself, calling you to turn from sin and trust him, then do it.

Conclusion

Encouragement: Some of us might find ourselves unprepared for this moment, God has revealed that our lamps (as it were) are dry.

- But he can fill them ("Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Give me oil in my lamp, I pray. Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Keep me burning till the break of day").
 - Recognizing and admitting our weakness is the first step, even if it is often the hardest part.
 - By God's grace, he opens our eyes to our need for him (and him alone). We can't prepare for what we can't envision. But, through his Word and by his Spirit, God has given us a vision of his glory so we can see our sin and see his beauty. Now we prepare by trusting him completely.