

## “Ready, Waiting, Serving”

Matthew 25:1-30

January 24, 2021

Over the last couple weeks we have been taking to heart Matthew 24, where Jesus has been preparing us for the coming days of tribulation and persecution as the end of the age draws to a close. Repeatedly Jesus has urged us to make sure we are ready for the unexpected hour of His return and holding the hope of His second coming in our hearts.

Perhaps the urgency of Jesus warning to not delay in making ourselves ready can be illustrated by an experience my mentor in seminary related to us. He was asked to take a friend to the train station. Unfortunately, the departure time was in the middle of the night. So being the disciplined man of preparation that he was, Dr. Scharf went to bed that night with his clothes on, not taking any chances on missing his friend’s train. However, when he awoke, he realized that he had overslept, so he jumped out of bed, ran to his car and drove to his friend’s house to find him still sleeping too. After waking his friend, they sped toward the train station, but heavy rains were causing water to accumulate in the streets and at one particular low spot in the road, the water caused the car to stall. After a couple minutes they were able to get the car started and raced again toward the station. Just as they pulled up to the station, they saw the door of train close. The man grabbed his bag, ran as fast as he could and pounded on the door which was opened to him as the train was beginning to roll down the tracks. I will never forget Dr. Scharf’s words: “If I had not gone to bed with my pants on, we would have been too late!”

Beloved, if we don’t make ourselves ready today for Christ’s return, there’s no guarantee that we will have sufficient time tomorrow. We don’t know if Jesus will come today or if He will come a hundred years from now. But the essential facts are clear:

- Jesus is coming again and an unexpected hour.
- He will judge sinners.
- He will rescue and reward believers.
- And His appearing will conclude the hour of opportunity to prepare for final judgment or salvation.

As we come to Mt 25 today, Jesus is going to use two more parables to urge us to be ready for His return and teach us how to spend our lives as we await His second coming.

### 1. **Readiness for Christ’s return requires self-examination (Mt 25:1-13). *Do you truly know Christ?***

**[25:1-13]** Wedding customs in Jesus’ day were much different than ours today so we might not realize how often this imagery is used.

#### **The Marriage Arrangement:** Gen 24

Marriages in biblical times were arranged by the parents and typically initiated by the Father of the groom. For example, Abraham took the initiative in sending his servant to find a wife for His son Isaac in Gen 24.

#### **The Bride Price:** Gal 4:4; 1Cor 6:19-20; 1Pet 1:18-19

When the Father found a prospective bride, he would send his son, the bridegroom to the home of the bride to offer her father a bride price. This was a way for the groom to demonstrate that he was financially capable of providing for the all the needs of the bride. Gal 4:4 says that when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son to redeem us. You are the bride that the Father has sent His Son to gain. “Do you not know...that you are not your own? You have been bought with a price?” (1 Cor 6:19-20). Every believer in Jesus Christ is a blood-bought bride. 1 Peter 1 says we were redeemed not with perishable things like gold and silver, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished, the blood of Christ.” So when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, we celebrate the Father’s affirmation that Jesus’ payment was sufficient for His bride. He is more than sufficient to care for our every need.

#### **The Betrothal:** Luke 22:20; Eph 5:26; Jude 1:24; 2Cor 11:2

Once the bride price was offered, then the couple would be betrothed (a legally binding covenant that could only be broken by divorce). The betrothal was entered into as the couple sipped over a cup while the father of the bride offered a prayer of blessing. At the last supper, Jesus took the cup, shared it with His disciples and said, “This cup is a new covenant in my blood shed for you” (Luke 22:20). Paul said to the Corinthians, “I betrothed

you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you *as* a pure virgin” (2Cor 11:2).

Having been betrothed, the couple were considered husband and wife, but continued to live in separate households until the wedding ceremony. During this time they were to remain exclusively set apart for one another just as the church is to be a bride without spot or blemish so that we can be presented to Christ holy and blameless (Eph 5:27). The father of the bride assumed responsibility for presenting the bride in purity to her husband. Jude 1:24 declares that “God is able to keep you from stumbling and present you before Him blameless and with great joy.”

**The Preparations:** John 14:1-3; Rev 21:2; Mt 24:36; Acts 1:7

After the betrothal, the groom would return to His father’s house to prepare a home for His bride. In John 14, Jesus said, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places....I go to prepare a place for you and...I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” Rev 21 describes our new heavenly home “as a bride adorned for her husband.”

It’s interesting to note that it was not up to the groom to decide when the accommodations were ready for his bride. That decision was his father’s. Remember, when the disciples asked about the timing of His return, Jesus said in Mt. 24:36, “*no one knows the day or the hour, not even the Son. Only the Father knows*” (cf. Acts 1:7). It was the Father’s role, not Jesus’, to determine the time of His return.

**The Procession (Return):** Mt 25:1-13; Rev 19:9; 1Thess 4:16

This brings us now to the wedding custom that Jesus is referring to in His parable. When the time came for the groom to go for his bride, the groom would lead a procession to the home of his bride (usually at night) announcing to his friends that he was going to claim his bride and inviting them to meet back at his Father’s house for the wedding feast. Keep in mind the words of Rev 19:9, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” Blessed are those who forsake life on their own, to be betrothed to Christ, for He will come again and escort them into His heavenly home.

But how would the bride know that her groom was coming for her (2 Tim 4:8)? She didn’t know the hour that he would come. She was simply ready

and waiting. Just before he arrived the groom would shout to for her, announcing his arrival. 1 Thess 4:16 says, That the Lord Himself will descend from heaven (for His bride) with a shout!

**The Presentation (Feast):** Rev 19:7-9; 21:9; Jude 1:24

The couple along with the wedding party would then light their lamps and torches for the festive procession back to his father’s house for the wedding feast, called the presentation, where the pure bride was presented faultless and with great joy (Jude 1:24)! Then the wedding supper would begin and when the guests saw the bride they would praise and honor the groom for the beauty of his pure bride. Rev 19:7 says, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, of the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.”

**The Consummation (New Home):** 1Thess 4:17b; John 14:3c; Rev 21:3

The final stage was the consummation. The bride’s hand would be placed in the groom’s hand and for the first time they would be left alone to enter their new home together. This is the goal of our redemption, to always and forever be with the Lord.

Jesus’ parable (Mt. 25) uses the imagery of the groom coming for the waiting bride and her bridesmaids to take them to the feast. But he comes at a later hour than they expect, and some of the bridesmaids have not brought oil for their lamps. When they hear the shout that the bridegroom has arrived, it’s too late.

The problem is not that they have taken a nap while they are waiting—both the wise and the foolish sleep. The problem is that the foolish are not prepared. They had the appearance of readiness (they had their lamps), but they did not have the oil they needed to produce light in their lamps.

Jesus is appealing to those who gather as though they are a part of the church awaiting His return. His parable is a warning that not everyone who appears to be ready is truly ready. While some may carry a lamp with the appearance of godly interest, they do not have its true power.

Beloved, ***outward appearances will mean nothing on the day of Christ’s return.*** The outward profession of faith must be empowered by the inward

possession of the Spirit. Those who are not ready cannot be helped by their close association with those who are ready. The wise who were prepared didn't share their oil, not because they were selfish, but because **each person is responsible for his own readiness**. No other person can give you the source of spiritual light. Your faith in Christ must be your own.

Furthermore, **when Jesus comes, the opportunity for preparation has passed**. When the foolish maids returned, the wedding part had already gone, and the doors of the wedding feast closed. They begged for the door to be opened, but the groom replied, "I do not know you." **Those who are ready are those who know Jesus**. Those who don't know Him may have certain outward appearances of spiritual and religious life, yet they will be excluded from the feast of eternal life because they do not know Christ. And so Jesus says (vs. 13), "be on the alert"—be ready!—for you do not know the day nor the hour."

It's sobering to think that when Jesus returns, there will be people who know the gospel but have not yet heeded its truth. Some will have seen and tasted of the reality of God's grace among His people, but not yielded to its power. The one who knows the truth of the gospel and senses its truthfulness yet tells himself he will take care of it later, demonstrates that he is not in a state of readiness, for he still wants to indulge in worldly pleasures at the expense of eternity. He's like the one who says, "I'll put my seatbelt on when I see a crash coming" yet the moment of reality is too late.

Beloved, **the most pressing and essential matter in all of life is the true disposition of your heart before God today**. The Bible says, "now is the day of salvation" (2Cor 6:2). "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts (Heb 3:7). Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him...for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa 55:6-7). Paul says, "Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! (2Cor 13:5). Peter says, "be diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you" (2 Pet 1:10).

Don't be among those who go to church but don't progress into a true relationship with Jesus. Don't be among those who embrace biblical ethics, yet the base desires of their heart remain selfishly unchanged. Don't be among those who identify with Christian subculture but don't identify personally and intimately with Jesus. Readiness for Christ's return requires true examination. Do you truly know Christ?

## 2. **Readiness for Christ's return results in active kingdom investment (Mt 25:14-30). *Are you faithfully serving Christ?***

**[Mt 25:14-30]** "Slaves in the ancient world could enjoy considerable responsibility and authority."<sup>1</sup> In this case, the master who is going on a journey, entrusts assets to his servants to engage in business dealings while he is away to keep growing his business. The word "talents" is a measure of weight for currency. But the point is that he entrusts resources to his servants according to each servant's abilities. The servant that was entrusted with 5 talents immediately put his seed money to work and earned 5 more talents for his master. The servant who was given two talents did the same, also doubling his earnings for his master.

When the master returned, He was pleased, not so much with their earnings as he was with the character of faithfulness they displayed (21, 23). He commends them for being good and faithful and then rewards them with even greater responsibility to steward and the joy of sharing in the bounty of the kingdom.

The point that Jesus is making is that those who faithfully steward their lives and all that God has given them, will share in the benefits of God's kingdom. And the key here is their relationship of obedience and faithfulness to their master. Again, the emphasis of this parable is not so much on the amount of each servant's accomplishments, but on the faithfulness that stood behind their fruitfulness. We all have differing capacities and capabilities and are entrusted with differing degrees of responsibility and opportunity. But all of us are expected to demonstrate faithfulness in what God has entrusted to us in this life.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*: Vol 8, pg. 515.

Jesus then contrasts the faithful servants with the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave who was not a faithful steward. When given a single talent, he went and buried it in the ground rather than investing it for kingdom gain. And while this seemed to be the least risky thing to do, it proved to be the most detrimental. The deepest problem lies with his attitude toward his master. Notice how he seeks to excuse his lazy and irresponsible behavior by blaming his master. Vs. 24: *“I knew you to be a hard man reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid...”* He accuses his master of being demanding and frugal. By the way, lazy people always consider their bosses to be overly demanding.

But the master catches the man in his own words and exposes his foolish irresponsibility. In essence he says, “If you think me to be such a hard, demanding master, then you’d have been wise to put my assets to work.” Then he takes the one talent away from the unfaithful slave and gives it to another.

The kingdom principle that Jesus is driving at is found in [vs. 29]. Here’s the point: The one who truly possess the kingdom will faithfully bear fruit that continues to multiply (there will be life and growth). But the one who squanders the life of opportunity that God has given him, demonstrates that he does not truly possess spiritual life and even what he has been given of earthly life will be taken away. The only thing he will inherit is eternal punishment where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. ***There is no sharing in the kingdom of God where there is no faithfulness in living for the master.*** I’m not saying that people can’t be saved in the last hour of their life, like the thief on the cross. But when you are given the opportunity of 10, 20 or 30 years with an understanding of the gospel, your faithfulness (or lack of faithfulness) to Jesus will determine if your response to the gospel is indeed genuine.

We have got to throw out this idea that just because a person had a come to Jesus moment 25 years ago, that we can comfort ourselves in their

conversion though they have almost exclusively indulged in selfishly living for the world and flesh since.

***The way you steward the life that God has given you will reveal your most genuine attitude toward God.*** And it’s the attitudes of your heart that are most revealing, not just mere behavior. You will know that you are truly serving Christ when the daily reality of living for Jesus overshadows living for self.

Beloved, we are living in the period of time between the Master’s departure and His soon, unexpected return. Readiness in waiting means examining our hearts to make sure that they are indeed rooted in Christ and then bearing the fruit of faithfully serving Christ day by day as we await his coming.

We would be wise to not walk away from Mt 24-25 merely assuming all is well with our soul. We know from the NT that<sup>2</sup>:

- A person can have a commitment to moral living, yet not be born again (Mt 19:16-21; 23:28).
- A person can have intellectual knowledge about the Bible, yet not be born again (Rom 1:21).
- A person can be religious and active in ministry, yet not be born again (John 3; Mt 7:21-24).
- A person can feel guilty over their sin, yet not be born again (2Cor 7:9-10).
- A person can be confident of their religious and theological views, yet not be born again (John 5:39-40).
- A person may have had a moment of decision, a momentary response to the gospel, without genuine rebirth (Luke 8:13-14; the parable of the soils where the seed springs up quickly but dies away because it does not take root and bear fruit).

Jesus said, “you must be born again” and this rebirth, He said, is like the wind. You can’t see it physically, but you can see its effects (John 3:3-8). So what are the evidences of true spiritual life? Paul said in 2 Cor 5, “Christ died so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for

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<sup>2</sup> The following list adapted from *The MacArthur Study Bible*, appendix 1, pg. 1999.

[Christ]...Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, the old has gone, the new has come!" (5:15, 17). In other words, when Jesus comes into your life, He gives you a new disposition that changes the basic orientation of your life from living for yourself to living for Christ (1Jn 2:6). And this will be seen in ongoing repentance—turning from specific sin (2Cor 7:10) and obedience from the heart (1Jn 2:5). It will be seen in new desire for God whereby we measure the value of everything in this life by whether it pleases God (1Cor 10:31; Ps 73:25). Spiritual rebirth is marked by a newfound humility and an ongoing battle against pride. Jesus said, the kingdom of God is for the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3). That is, those who grasp that they have nothing they can offer to God in the spiritual ruin of their sin and that they can only be saved by humbly and wholly trusting in His mercy and grace.

1 John Challenge for anyone with an inkling of uncertainty (families).

Prayer: "Grant us eyes to see the value of Your worth, the sinfulness of our sin, and the sufficiency of Your grace."