

# WISDOM IN THE END

Matthew 25:1-13

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

November 12, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25, verses 1 through 13. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 25, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> For 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, they all became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ <sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup> 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.’ <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ <sup>12</sup> But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ <sup>13</sup> Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Who is foolish? And who is wise? Those who appear to be wise now will be revealed to be fools. And those who appear to be foolish now will be revealed to be wise.

The Christian faith is regarded by the world as foolishness. And we who hold to it are often mocked. We are called unscientific or superstitious for believing that God created the universe in six days by his powerful word. Meanwhile, as we discover more and more about the natural world, naturalist theories like the big bang or evolution become less and less plausible, while design appears more and more reasonable. But naturalist theories are assumed to be correct, because they don't need a god. Belief in God is dismissed out of hand as foolishness. Then we are called bigots or unenlightened for believing that God instituted marriage and that it serves children by keeping their mother and father close by. We're called judgmental or hypocritical for speaking about sin and believing that God's commandments protect us from harm. At the very center of our faith, we're just foolish and superstitious for believing the Jesus story. If the world has dismissed the notion of sin, then it's just foolish to believe that God would take on human flesh in order to die for sin. And it's regarded as superstition to believe that Jesus then rose from the dead, even though there were hundreds of eyewitnesses who testified to seeing him alive after his resurrection. And if all of that is foolish and superstitious, then it's just plain fringy to believe that Jesus is returning again and that all the dead will be raised. So the world regards our faith as foolish. But in the end, those who appear to be wise will be revealed to be fools, while those who appear foolish now, will be revealed as wise for trusting in Jesus.

## WISDOM IN THE END (Matthew 25:1-13)

We think of Noah, trying to live as the only righteous father on earth (Gen. 6:5-8). The entire earth was filled with corruption and violence. And he must have looked so foolish, trying to live according to God's Law and raising his sons to do the same. The rest of the world was living in rebellion and having fun with it. When there's just one man who tries to be different, he must look so foolish. And he must have looked even more foolish when he started building a massive boat. But his wisdom was finally justified when the fountains of the deep erupted and the windows of the heavens were opened (Gen. 7:11). Wisdom is often revealed only in the end.

Now this does not mean that bucking the trend or going against conventional wisdom is necessarily right. Noah could have built an ark just because he wanted to. He could have wished that God would wipe away the corrupt people of the world. But unless God had warned Noah and instructed him to build the ark, it would have been foolish to do so. We might be tempted toward conspiracy theories, simply because we want them to be true. We might say, "God's going to send a disaster, just like he did in the days of Noah." But we don't actually know that. Sometimes God judges a people by leaving them alone in their sin (Rom. 1:24, 26). There are some things we know, and some things we don't. It is foolishness to claim certainty for things we don't know. We can cry, "You'll all see in the end!" But if it doesn't come true, we will not be revealed to be wise.

When we, as Christians, hold our faith firmly in the face of mockery, we do so because we have solid reasons. The big reason is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He predicted that he would be crucified and on the third day be raised (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). Then he was crucified before many witnesses. And he was raised from the dead and appeared to more than five hundred witnesses (1 Cor. 15:6), many of whom suffered and died for their testimony. If Jesus had stayed dead, or even if there were a few scattered reports of his resurrection by people who all waffled when persecuted, we would have little reason to hold to our faith. It would not be reasonable. The wisdom that proves true in the end is not a wishful hunch where we cross our fingers, hoping it will come to pass. It doesn't matter how much gaslighting we do. If we don't have a firm reason, we will not be revealed as wise in the end. Wisdom is based on a firm reason. And wisdom rests on that firm reason when all the world calls it "foolishness."

If Jesus fulfilled his prediction by rising from the dead, then we are right to believe everything he said. We are right to believe that his death made satisfaction for our sin. And we are right to believe that he is returning again and that we will be raised from the dead. Even if the world calls this fringy or extreme, if the reason for our hope is firm, then our wisdom will be revealed in the end.

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Jesus illustrated this in the parable of the ten virgins. We would call them "bridesmaids" today. There are ten of them, and they're all waiting for the bridegroom to come, or so it seems.

We don't know a lot about ancient wedding practices. Much of what we know actually comes from biblical passages, like this one. It seems that, when everything was ready, the groom would go and fetch his bride from her parents' house, where she was waiting with her bridesmaids. Many weddings, or at least this one, took place at night. So the bridesmaids carried lamps in order to light the processional to the wedding hall.

There's a twist in this parable: "**The bridegroom was delayed**" (25:5). We don't know why, and that's not the point. It's just a necessary plot twist for Jesus to teach us that we must be ready for his return at any time. That's what the parable is about. It's about the return of Jesus Christ. One chapter before this, Jesus teaches us that, "**Concerning that day and hour no one knows**"

(24:36). Jesus does not tell us when it will be, and no man has the ability to figure it out. Therefore, we must be ready at any time.

Most end times teaching emphasizes the immanence of Jesus' return. I've heard many pastors and teachers instruct us that we should be ready for Jesus to return right now. And that is right, but it's only half of the truth. We must also be ready for Jesus' return to be delayed for many years, perhaps for our entire lifetime. This requires a different kind of preparedness. So there are two sides of it: We must be ready now. That is, we must believe now. It won't do to wait until Jesus appears and then repent. We must trust him now. But we must also be prepared to endure an entire life of suffering. For our entire lives, we may have to listen to the mockers say, "Where is your God? I thought you said he was returning? So where is he?" We may have to endure a lifetime of physical suffering, grief, pain, and loss. We may have to spend a lifetime struggling against temptation and sin, returning daily to confession, seeking God's mercy. And his forgiveness is certain, but we may still become tired of not being the way we know we're supposed to be. And we may die waiting. Most Christians throughout history have died waiting.

This is also illustrated in the parable. "**As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept**" (25:5). "Sleep" is one of the Bible's sweet names for death. It's my favorite name for death, because when someone falls asleep, we expect them to wake up again. Jesus used the name "sleep" to describe his friend Lazarus' death (John 11:11). Saint Paul used it several times (Acts 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13, 14, 15; 5:10), as did some of the other Biblical authors (Acts 7:60; 2 Pet. 3:4). It's a fitting description of death, because, at Jesus' return, he will call us out of death and back to life, just like waking up from a long slumber. Whenever we call death "sleep," we confess our glorious hope of resurrection. So even if we die before Jesus returns, we will not miss that glorious sight. The dead will be raised, and then all of Jesus' believing saints will join him (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

So we must be ready now, and we must be ready to wait.

When the bridegroom comes, he reveals who was wise and who was foolish. It wasn't obvious before, at least not to the people in the parable, but it is revealed in the end. The five wise virgins brought oil with their lamps, while the five foolish virgins did not. So when they wake up to the arrival of the bridegroom and try to light their lamps, they just flicker and go out. Their foolishness is revealed.

So the burning questions are, *What does the oil represent? And why didn't the foolish virgins bring any?* Jesus does not tell us exactly, as he does in some other parables. Many interpreters suggest that the oil represents faith. Others suggest it may be perseverance. Both are similar, because perseverance is simply faith that waits. Whatever the oil is, it's what is necessary to be ready when Jesus returns. And faith would certainly fit that description. So I think it is right to see the oil as faith.

And this also explains why the five foolish virgins didn't have any when the bridegroom came. Perhaps they burned through whatever was in their lamps. They would be like those who believe for a time, but as they wait, tribulation, persecution, or the cares of the world choke out their faith (Matt. 13:1-23). The waiting makes them think that it's not actually going to happen. Or it may be that they never expected the bridegroom to come in the first place. They brought a lamp, but they never expected the bridegroom to come. That would be like the appearance of godliness, without actually believing any of it.

So put yourselves in the place of these bridesmaids. Guys, you'll have to work harder to imagine this. Suppose your friend tells you about this really great guy that she's going to marry, and she wants you to be a bridesmaid. You've never met the guy, or maybe you know something

about him, and he seems to be out of your friend's league, kind of like how Jesus is out of the Church's league. So you question whether or not this guy is real or if he's actually going to marry your friend. She asks you to be a bridesmaid, and you accept, because it doesn't even matter. If you don't think this wedding is actually going to happen, you have nothing to lose. And you don't buy a dress, because you don't think you're ever going to wear it. You appear to be supportive, because it doesn't cost you anything, but when the wedding actually comes, and you're supposed to be there and ready, you're not. Your disbelief is finally revealed.

And I think that's what's going on with the five foolish virgins. They either lose faith when they have to wait longer than expected, or they never believed in the first place. Why bring oil that you're not going to use?

The tragedy is that these foolish virgins signify real people. They signify those who appear to be Christians. They are inside the visible church, but they don't believe. We have little or no indication of who these people are now, but they will be revealed on the Last Day.

They call themselves Christians. They probably attend church. But they don't believe it. Maybe they come along for the sake of their husband, their wife, their children, parents, or friends. Like the five foolish virgins, it's easier to just go along than admit that you consider all of this to be nonsense. When you hear the Word of God, you secretly say, "I don't know about that." You take the parts of the Bible you like, but casually ignore the offensive or unbelievable parts. It may be creation. It may be the Ten Commandments. It may be the miracles of Jesus or the doctrine in the epistles.

There are even pastors who call themselves Christians but deny parts of the Bible. Many disbelieve that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary. There are many who deny that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. I don't know of any in our association. But there are several denominations where about half of pastors admit on surveys that they just don't believe in the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And if you don't believe in Jesus' resurrection, you're certainly not going to believe that he is returning to raise all the dead. To them, the history of it just doesn't matter.

How about you? If we take the parts of the Bible we like, but leave the rest, is that really faith? If that's how we handle God's Word, then we are trusting our own wisdom over the Word of God. Faith doesn't take the parts that make sense but dismiss the unbelievable parts. So how about you? Are you watching and waiting for Jesus' return? Will you fall asleep thinking that's just the end, or do you expect to wake up to a trumpet call? If not, can we rightly call ourselves Christians?

Now you may say, "Pastor you don't have the right to judge whether or not I am a Christian." And you're right. I don't. But you know who else doesn't have a right to judge whether or not you are a Christian? You. You cannot self-identify as a Christian while not believing what God has spoken or trusting Jesus for salvation. Jesus is the one who will say on the last day, **"Truly, I say to you, I do not know you"** (25:12).

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So the five foolish virgins are a terrifying warning to those who refuse to believe. But to those who believe, and even to those who struggle to believe, the five wise virgins are a promise of vindication and eternal salvation.

You may feel like your faith is weak. This parable is not a contrast between those who truly believe and those who struggle to believe. They either have faith or they don't. The one who has doubts in the midst of faith is still among the wise. The five wise virgins experienced the same

waiting as the foolish virgins. The wise expected the bridegroom to come before they fell asleep, but he was delayed. Do you think they ever asked, “Where is he? Why isn’t he here yet?”

We have the same questions about Jesus now. Why has it been nearly two thousand years? Why does he allow wars to continue? Why are there so many injustices? When he comes again, he will make all things right. So we wonder why that day is not yet. The reason is that he desires more to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). But it just seems so long when we have to wait for it.

Jesus knows we have these questions. He knows we waver in our faith. That’s why he tells this parable. He doesn’t tell it for those who have 100% confidence all the time. They don’t need any encouragement, and such people probably don’t exist. He tells it for the sake of us who trust his promise, but struggle with doubt. He tells it to reassure us that even when we’ve passed the point where we expected him to come, his coming is still certain.

And when he comes, our faith, our struggling, and our suffering will all be vindicated. If we are mocked or persecuted now for our trust in Jesus, we will be vindicated on that day. We will experience the bliss of the new creation for all eternity.

In many places, Jesus describes the judgment of unbelievers with torturous imagery (e.g., 24:48-51; 25:46). So hell is real, and it is a place of torment. But in this parable, the negative consequence is missing out on the feast. As bad as the torment and flame of hell will be, the worst part is that it’s not heaven. So the emphasis is on the feast of heaven and how great that will be.

As Christians, our glorious hope is that day when Christ will come again. As we wait for this day, our lives are often filled with suffering, shame, and even death. We may be ridiculed for our faith in Jesus Christ. The world calls us foolish for believing some guy from two thousand years ago is going to come back. But as surely as he bore our sins in his body, carried them into death, and rose again triumphantly, he will come again in glory. He will raise the dead. And he will grant everlasting life to all who believe in him. For now our faith may waver. We may even doubt his promises and wonder if we are the fools. But our faith will be confirmed when he proves himself faithful.

His sacrifice has removed our sins and made us worthy for his kingdom. He has even forgiven the guilt we incur when we doubt him. And he will remove all doubt when he takes his stand on the earth once again.

“He will wipe away every tear from [your] eyes, and death shall be no more, [no more cancer, no more disease, no more war,] neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore” (Rev. 21:4).

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He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)