

INTRODUCTION

Everybody loves a wedding! Many people only have one, but some have several. A lady married a banker. He died, so then she married an actor—and he died. So for her third marriage, she chose a preacher. Sadly, he died, too. So finally she married a mortician. When somebody asked her about her four weddings she explained, “It wasn’t an accident, a banker, an actor, a preacher and a mortician. I planned it that way: One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go!”

As we study this parable about the return of Christ, I hope you’re ready to go!

In our Western culture, a wedding ceremony is a beautiful event where all the focus is on the bride. The groom and the preacher walk in and then the bridesmaids and groomsmen take their place. And some families include kids to serve as flower girls or ring bearers. Little kids can make for interesting weddings. One little guy came walking down the aisle holding the pillow with the rings and he was growling as he walked along, “Roar! Roar!” When somebody asked him what he was doing he said, “They told me that I’m the ring bear.”

But as all these attendants walk in, there is the anticipation for the entrance of the star of the event—the beautiful bride. As the back door opens, the organ begins to play. I can almost hear it now. The Bride’s mother stands, which is a cue for everyone else to stand, and every eye is on the bride as she walks down the aisle; except mine. I always watch the groom as he watches his bride approach him.

“Here Comes the Bride...” Does anyone know the words to the rest of that song? As kids we sang funny songs about the bride being big fat and wide, and the groom being skinny as a broom, but those aren’t part of the original lyrics. Actually, the words “Here Comes the Bride” aren’t part of Wagner’s composition. That chorus is from his opera *Lohengrin*, written in German in 1850. The first line translates as: “Faithfully guided, draw near to where the blessing of love shall preserve you.”

In this message, instead of focusing on “Here comes the bride, we’re going to focus on here comes the Bridegroom, because Jesus is coming soon.

Before we read the parable, let’s place it in context. Remember, Jesus is only a few hours away from being arrested, tried, and nailed to a cross. I think it’s important to realize Jesus could have taught on any topic knowing it would be His final teaching before the cross—and He chose to talk about His return. There is a pattern He repeats several times. When you see the same Biblical statement repeated, you should pay attention because it’s important. For instance, in Matthew 24:36 He says, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Then skip down to Matthew 24:42. Again He says, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” Next look at Matthew 24:44. He says, “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Ignore the chapter division between Matthew 24 and 25 because those are manmade; He continues the thread of being ready. Look down to Matthew 25:13 to find the

point of His parable about the bridesmaids: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

Now that we've established the pattern, let's listen to the Words of the Great Storyteller in Matthew 25:1-13:

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

In Western culture, a wedding has two stages: the engagement and the wedding ceremony, which usually includes a reception. But in Jewish culture there were three separate phases. First there was the arrangement stage. This would happen when the parents of a son and daughter would make a formal arrangement. This was a financial transaction in which the groom's father would pay a dowry to the bride's family. In fact, the groom's family paid all the wedding expenses. Having paid for two daughters to get married, I favor the Jewish custom of letting the groom's family pay for the wedding! This arrangement stage often happened when the bride and groom were children and they had no choice in the matter. I think many parents today would be in favor of choosing their kids' spouses.

The second step was the betrothal. This was a ceremony in which the bride and groom would actually exchange vows before their family members. The marriage would be official at this point, but the bride and groom did not live together, and there was no physical contact. A betrothal could last almost a year. Meanwhile, the groom was preparing a place at his father's house where the couple would live. Remember, Jesus said that in His Father's house were many rooms and He was going to prepare a place for us.

The third stage of a Jewish wedding provides the setting of this parable. It was the wedding feast. The bride would be in her home and at an unexpected time, her groom would come and claim her and take her to his father's house for the Wedding Feast. This was a joyous experience for the bride and groom and their friends. The bride wouldn't know the exact time the groom would come and claim her, so she had to stay ready. She posted bridesmaids outside her house to keep watch. The groom and his friends would make a game of sneaking in undetected and taking the bride. If someone saw the bridegroom, they would immediately sound the alarm, "Here comes the Bridegroom!" Then, the bridesmaids would walk in a procession on either side of the bride and groom. As they held their lamps high, it was a parade of lights all the way to place where the

wedding feast would be held. These were common lamps, small, with a wick made of cloth. As the cloth soaked in the combustible olive oil it would burn.

Of course, in one context we could say the Bride is the church, Jesus is the Bridegroom, and one day He's going to sneak back in and snatch his Bride and take the church to His Father's house. I could preach an entire message on that truth. But in this particular parable, where is the bride? She isn't even mentioned and the bridegroom plays a minor role. Instead, Jesus highlights the ten bridesmaids, so that's the part of the parable we'll examine.

These bridesmaids represent people in the church who are watching for the return of Christ. Jesus said five of them were wise, because they took oil for their lamps, and five were foolish because they ran out of oil. So let's learn four 21st century lessons from this first century parable.

I. NOT EVERYONE WHO APPEARS RELIGIOUS IS READY FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST

All ten girls were invited to the party and they had been chosen to be part of the candle-lit procession to the groom's home. They were all waiting and watching for the bridegroom. But there was one important difference. Jesus said, "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps."

In the Old Testament, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The prophet Zechariah describes a vision of two huge olive trees dripping oil into bowls. Then he writes, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4:6)

The five foolish girls represent people who appear religious. They have all the outward trappings of faith. They attend church, they read their Bibles, and help other people. They just lack the essential quality that makes a person a real Christian, the Holy Spirit. The five foolish girls represent people who claim to be Christians, but have never been indwelt by the Spirit of God.

They had fixed their hair, applied their makeup, put on the lip gloss, but they neglected the single requirement for their job—oil.

A pastor friend of mine in Houston tells about needing to have a suit dry-cleaned. It was an emergency because he needed to wear it at a wedding that same night. He remembered a store that advertised "One-Hour Dry Cleaning." It was on the other side of Houston, so he drove many miles to drop off his suit. As the clerk filled out the forms he said, "I have a few errands to run and I'll be back in an hour to pick up my suit." She said, "This suit won't be ready until Tuesday." He said, "I thought you did dry cleaning in an hour." She said, "Oh, no, that's just the name of the store, we don't actually do that." Some people are Christians in name only. They claim to be Christians, but they should be charged with false advertising. Oh, they do a lot of good things, but they just never get around to doing the best thing. Here are three examples:

A. Going to church is good; coming to Christ is better

You can have your own pew or seat staked out, and you can have perfect attendance for a year. But if all you have ever done is come to church, and you've never come to Christ, then you are like a foolish bridesmaid.

B. Being baptized is good; being born again is better

You can be baptized so many times in a farm pond until you know every catfish by its first name, and you still might not be saved. The water of baptism doesn't wash away your sins. Only the blood of Jesus can do that. Jesus told Nicodemus, a moral religious man, that he had to be born again.

C. Giving money is good; giving your heart to Jesus is better

When Jesus comes knocking at the door of your heart, don't slide a \$20 bill under the door. God doesn't need your money. But He wants to have a personal relationship with you. Will you give Him your heart?

One way to know if you're truly saved is to check your heart. Do you have a longing, and an excitement about Jesus coming back? Or is it just another religious doctrine that you think about every now and then?

I don't read a lot of poetry, but through the years I've been blessed by the poetic gift God gave to Annie Johnson Flint. She has a great understanding of watching and waiting for Jesus: It is not for a sign we are watching; For wonders above and below, The pouring of vials of judgment, The sounding of trumpets of woe. It is not for a Day we are looking, Not even the time yet to be; When the earth shall be filled with God's glory; As the waters cover the sea. We wait for the Lord, our Beloved, Our Comforter, Master and Friend, The substance of all that we hope for, Beginning of faith, and its end; We watch for our Savior and Bridegroom, Who loved us and made us His own; For Him we are looking and longing: For Jesus, and Jesus alone! ("For What We are Watching")

II. YOU CAN'T BORROW SOMEONE ELSE'S FAITH—YOU MUST EXPRESS YOUR OWN

(Oil represents the Holy Spirit). Because the bridegroom delayed his appearance, they all went to sleep. Then just when they didn't expect it, he showed up. We read, "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'"

Now, the question is, did the foolish bridesmaids have oil and then run out? Does that represent someone who once was saved and then became lost? No, you can't lose your salvation. Notice in verse 3 Jesus said, "The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take ANY oil with them." They had a lamp (a testimony), but they had no oil. When they lit their cloth wicks, there was a sputter

as the oil-soaked wick burned for a few seconds, but with no oil, it quickly went out. They tried to borrow oil from the wise girls, but they were turned down because that would not leave enough oil for them to complete the procession.

The point here is clear: You can't borrow someone else's faith. You can learn from my faith, but you can't use my faith. Even though I'm saved, I cannot become your Savior. Even though you have received the Grace of God, you can't impart the grace of God to anyone else. I can give my life for you, but I can't live your life, and you can't live mine.

Through the years I've had people say something like, "My granddaddy was the preacher that started Ebenezer Baptist Church." It's almost as if they are trying to go to heaven on granddaddy's coattails. You can't do that. Or someone will say, "My mother was one of the greatest Bible teachers I've ever known about. She faithfully taught her Sunday School class for 45 years." Good for her, but you can't get into heaven on your mother's faith.

God has children, but He has no grandchildren. You can't borrow faith from your parents or grandparents. They can instill God's Word in your heart and train you in the things of God, but they can't give you their faith. You have to choose to follow Jesus on your own.

III. THE DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY TO FOLLOW CHRIST WILL ONE DAY BE CLOSED

The foolish girls head off to buy oil, but you've got to wonder where they will be able to buy oil at midnight. Jesus continued the story, "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut."

The door of heaven is open right now, but you must realize that one day the door will be shut. If you don't accept Christ today, you might not have another chance. You could drop dead today, or Jesus could return in a twinkling of an eye. The worst thing that could happen to a person would be to stand in front of the door of heaven and it's shut. And they stand there on the outside looking in.

A few years ago I was making a connection at DFW. The flight from Tyler was late arriving so I had to run to my next gate. As I ran to the boarding area I breathed a sigh of relief because I could see the plane was still parked at the gate. I approached the gate agent with my boarding pass and she said, "I'm sorry, you can't get on this flight. Boarding is over." I said, "But I can see the plane right there. It hasn't left yet!" She said, "Sorry, but FAA regulations say once the door is shut, no one is allowed on the aircraft." I've since learned the airlines often make an exception to this rule, but this gate agent wasn't going to budge. So you can imagine my frustration at standing in the gate watching the plane push back and taxi out. I was on the outside looking in.

Someone said opportunity only knocks once—but by the time you unlatch the chain, push back the bolt, and unlock the two dead bolts, and turn off the alarm, opportunity has already gone.

Today is just one more door of opportunity for you to give your life to Christ. One day the door will be shut and you don't want to be on the outside looking in.

IV. BEWARE OF THE DANGER OF SELF-DECEPTION

Sometimes the parables of Jesus have a surprise ending. This is one of them. What's wrong with the climax of this story? Try to picture it. These five girls show up panting for breath, holding their shoes, and their hair is out of place. But they finally get to the party. They say, "Sorry we're late, let us in!" Now in real life wouldn't you expect the groom to say, "Hey no problem, we wondered where you were. Come on in!" But Jesus gives this surprise ending to teach us something very important about God. Not everyone who expects to gain entrance into heaven will actually be allowed.

These five latecomers really expected to gain entrance. They said, "Sir, Sir" which are the words, "Lord, Lord." The groom's response was, "I don't know you." Does that language ring a bell? Of course, it sounds exactly like Matthew 7 where Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers.'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

My point is, the five foolish girls and the people in Matthew 7 really *expected* to gain entrance. The girls were wearing the right costumes, they had the lamps, they looked just like the other five who were inside. The people described in Matthew 7 knew the language and even performed religious deeds. But the bottom line is this: It's all about knowing Jesus. Do you know Jesus? Does He know you?

I've heard people say, "You can fool everybody else but you can't fool yourself." Oh yes you can. The Bible speaks about the possibility of self-deception. In James 1:22 The Bible says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." It's possible to deceive yourself into thinking you are a real Christian, when you have just gotten comfortable in acting like a Christian.

How many of you have ever run out of gas? AAA reports they answer 500,000 calls a year for people running out of gas. In earlier days, when gas gauges weren't that accurate, it wasn't that hard to run out of gas. But today, vehicles have warning lights, bell tones, and other warnings. I even had a car once that said in a pleasant female voice, "Warning, fuel level is low." So with all the technology we have today, for someone to run out of gas is inexcusable. But do you know why people run out of gas? They deceive themselves. They may ignore the warning, thinking it will go away. Or maybe they don't believe the warning. They think, "Surely, I've got more gas than that. I've got that same message before and I've always been able to get to a gas station." In other words, they think, "I've still got time to deal with the problem, surely there will be a gas station somewhere up ahead."

But for millions of drivers, there is a cough and a shudder, and the car rolls to a stop. Their false confidence was their downfall. They deceived themselves into thinking they could make it.

That's not a big problem if you run out of gas. But when it comes to salvation, knowing Jesus, I'm just another warning light for you. Do you know Jesus Christ? If you don't, then don't go another day without placing your faith in Him.

CONCLUSION

Here's a true story. In the mid 1800s, Elisha Gray worked on an invention that would ultimately change the world. He designed a device and set up an experiment and it worked perfectly. If he had filed a patent on this invention his name would be known to every one of us. But he delayed filling out the paperwork for the patent for two months. When he finally arrived at the U.S. Patent office, he was devastated to learn that two hours earlier that morning, a school teacher who had been conducting similar experiments had filed for a patent. That school teacher's name? Bell. Alexander Graham Bell. The invention? A device to transmit a human voice over telegraph wires, a telephone. If Elisha Gray had taken the opportunity to file in a timely way, we would be talking about Gray Telephone instead of Bell Telephone.

The reason we all know the name Alexander Graham Bell, and never heard of Elisha Gray (until today) is because one man was wise and seized the opportunity when he could. The other man was foolish and waited until it was too late.

There's a popular gospel song called "At the Midnight Hour." It comes from this parable where the Bridegroom appeared at midnight. The first verse says, "I hear the sound of a mighty rushing wind; and it's closer now than it's ever been. I can almost hear the trumpet as Gabriel sounds the call; At the midnight cry, we'll be going home."

Great song, but the Bible never says Gabriel is going to blow a trumpet—no that's not in the Bible. There have been lots of songs about Gabriel blowing his horn. Even the song "The eyes of Texas" ends with the words, "The eyes of Texas will be upon you 'til Gabriel blows his horn." Sorry, but no, that's not in the Bible.

According to Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians, when Jesus returns there will be a sound of a trumpet and a shout in the voice of the archangel. We don't know who will blow the horn, but we do know who will be shouting, because there is only one archangel identified in scripture: Michael. What do you think he will shout? None of us can know for certain, but based upon this parable, don't be surprised to hear these words, "HERE COMES THE BRIDEGROOM!" Will you be ready to meet Him?

OUTLINE

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes