

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Oil Shortage**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:1-30

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We continue this morning with our study of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25, delivered by Jesus just a couple of days prior to His crucifixion. Last words spoken by a loved one are often considered especially significant, and since this is Jesus' last major discourse with His disciples, I would assume it contains truth He wants to leave uppermost in their minds and ours.

In our last chapter, Matthew 24, Jesus answered two questions the disciples asked Him as they sat on the Mount of Olives within sight of the temple in Jerusalem. When He predicted the total destruction of that temple they asked, "*When* will this happen, and *what* will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

Jesus answered the second question first, giving them a series of signs which we discussed in mid-December as stages of birth labor. Then last Lord's Day Pastor Dick presented Christ's answer to the first question: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Now think about that carefully. He has just given us numerous signs we should look for; and then He tells us we can't know when it will happen. Is there a contradiction there?

I don't think so, because Jesus chooses His words very carefully. As the signs appear we *may* be able to discern that the Second Coming is imminent, right at the door. We may even be able to discern the year or the season, but we will never be able to figure out the exact time in advance, because as 24:22 says, "for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened." In other words, the divine plan itself will be adjusted by God to enable some to survive that awful time of tribulation.

The point of the whole chapter seems to be given in verse 42: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Now, what Jesus taught so vividly in that passage, with illustrations from the story of Noah, from the thief at night, and from the account of the wicked servant, He now continues to illustrate in two of His most profound parables—the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Talents. I've taken my sermon title this morning from the first of these two parables.

The parable of the Ten Virgins stresses how critical it is to be *spiritually prepared* for the Lord's return. (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.

This is the Word of the Lord!

Ten virgins go out to meet the bridegroom. (1) What is the cultural setting here? A Jewish marriage consisted of three events. The first was a sort of engagement, usually arranged by the fathers with little direct involvement from the man or woman. The second was the betrothal at which the couple exchanged vows in the presence of family and friends. At this point they were considered married, and their relationship could be broken only by formal divorce. In fact, if the husband died during the betrothal period, the bride was considered a widow, even though the marriage was not yet consummated. The betrothal could last for many months, even a year or longer, during which time the groom would establish himself in a trade and provide a place for the couple to live.

The third and final event was the wedding feast. This could last a week, and it began with the groom and his groomsmen coming to the bride's house and leading her and her bridesmaids on a parade through the streets, proclaiming that the wedding feast was about to begin. The procession was generally at night, with lamps or torches used to illumine the way and to attract attention. At the end of the feast the bride would go home with the groom and they would begin to live together as husband and wife.¹ It is this third part of the marriage ritual that Jesus uses as the framework for this parable.

In this parable the bridegroom clearly represents Christ, and the wedding feast represents that great banquet that will be celebrated by Jesus and His bride the Church at the time of His Second Coming (called the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19:9). The ten virgins who go out to meet the bridegroom represent professing believers who are expecting to enter the Kingdom. By the way, I don't think there is any particular significance in the use of the term "virgin." Bridesmaids were always unmarried friends of the bride, and so the term seems to be equivalent to "girlfriends of the bride."

The ten bridesmaids are indistinguishable from one another. All are dressed appropriately for a wedding and all have the required torch for the wedding parade. Yet they are not entirely alike.

Five are called foolish, having not taken sufficient oil for their lamps. (2-5) The others are called wise or prudent. The evidence that some are foolish is that they took no extra oil with them, while the prudent girls took oil in jars along with their lamps. The kind of lamp referred to here is really a torch, essentially consisting of an oily rag on the end of a stick. It would burn for a while, but eventually the rag would need to be dipped in oil again. It was really foolish for these five girls to think that the amount of oil on the rag would be sufficient,

especially considering the fact that they had no way of knowing for sure when the bridegroom would arrive.

That, in fact, the bridegroom was a long time in coming (verse 5) seems to be a strong hint from Jesus to His disciples that He would not be returning as soon as they anticipated. In Luke 19:11 we read that “the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.” In numerous ways Jesus tried to warn them that this would not be the case.

Of course His coming is delayed, not from the divine perspective but from the human perspective. Peter tells us in his second epistle that Jesus is not tardy in returning to earth; rather His delay is due to the fact that God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). We, of course, can easily be deceived into thinking that the Second Coming (so long already in coming) is still so far in the future that we don’t need to give it much thought. Thus we are tempted to go about business as usual and fail to pay attention to our own oil shortage.

At the end of verse 5 we read that due to the bridegroom’s delay, the girls become drowsy and fall asleep. We may be tempted to assume that this indicates laziness or faithlessness, but it is important to note that even the prudent bridesmaids fall asleep. Under these circumstances, sleep seems wise. After all, preparations have been made, and once the bridegroom arrives they will be busy for a long time, so there is nothing wrong with getting some rest while they can. But the suggestion of some commentators is intriguing—that the sleep of the foolish ones may suggest false confidence, while the sleep of the prudent ones suggests their genuine security and rest in the Lord.ⁱⁱ

The delayed bridegroom arrives unexpectedly at midnight. (6-9) Verse 6: “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’” Immediately the bridesmaids spring into action. All ten wake up; all ten get to work trimming their torches. But then the difference between the two groups is revealed. The foolish ones find themselves in trouble; their torches are going out and they have no oil in reserve. Yet they don’t panic; after all, the other girls have oil in jars. They just ask the prudent ones to share their oil.

But the prudent bridesmaids refuse, because they fear there won’t be enough oil, and it is absolutely essential that the bridegroom be welcomed. Instead they say, “Go buy some for yourselves.” That sounds like something of a hopeless quest at midnight, but it should be understood that whenever there was a wedding procession the whole town was awake, and it’s quite possible someone could be persuaded to sell the girls some oil. While they are on their search, however, the bridegroom arrives, the wedding feast begins, and the door is shut. Some have argued that the girls with the oil ought to have been kinder to those without and to have shared what they had. But, friends, some things simply cannot be borrowed or loaned. There is little doubt in my mind that the lesson Jesus intends here is that just as a torch without oil is worthless and leaves its owner in darkness, so also a profession of faith in Jesus Christ without a saving relationship with Him is worthless and leaves the person in spiritual darkness. These foolish bridesmaids represent a large part of the professing church (at least 50%?), who do not really belong to God. They may claim a commitment to Christ religiously, intellectually,

socially, even emotionally, but they do not have saving faith. Their parents may have saving faith, their spouse may have, their friends may have. But just as one person cannot transfer his physical life to another person, neither can he share spiritual life, which is a direct, individual gift from God. The saved cannot themselves become saviors.

The foolish bridesmaids eventually show up at the wedding banquet but are denied entrance. (10-12) They beg to be admitted, “Sir! Sir! Open the door for us!” They lack no desire to attend. They no doubt even have their invitations in hand. But the bridegroom replies, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.” How can he say this? Surely he knows them; after all, they are friends of his bride! He has probably met them many times when visiting her!

Yes, He knows who they are, but that is far different from knowing them as intimate friends with whom he desires long-term fellowship. How many times does Jesus say regarding professing believers, “I never knew you!”? He doesn’t mean that He lacks knowledge of their identity; He means there is no relationship, no intimate fellowship between them and Him.

These girls who had been expecting to be on center stage with their torches in the procession sadly find themselves excluded for good because they were not ready when the bridegroom arrived. And frankly, it will be a moment of sheer terror when unbelievers face a holy God and realize with absolute certainty that they are eternally lost. It will be like the people of Noah’s day when the flood waters started to rise around their necks and they realized the door to the ark was unalterably shut.

Jesus draws His own conclusion to the parable: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (13) This is the fifth time in the Olivet Discourse that Jesus has called on those who will be alive during the last days of the Tribulation to be alert and ready for His coming. The warnings back in chapter 24 seem to me to be addressed principally to true believers, urging them to be ready and prepared (“Keep watch because you do not know on what day *your* Lord will come”—24:42). And there are many ways we can do that: we need to be prayed up, ‘fessed up, and studied up; we need to share our faith with close friends and relatives, to resolve conflicts in our families and to pay off our debts to man and to God.

But it seems to me that the principal thrust of this warning in the Parable of the Ten Virgins is not to believers but to pseudo-believers. I think Jesus is talking to the professing church, to the many who think they are safe because they have a religious heritage or because they belong to a church or because they are “doing their best.” They need to come to grips with the fact that when anyone without a personal relationship with Christ takes his last breath or when Jesus returns, whichever comes first, it’s over! Those not spiritually ready will shut *themselves* out for eternity.

In his epic poem *Idylls of the King*, Alfred Lord Tennyson uses the parable of the ten virgins in a song directed at the wicked Queen Guinevere, who learned too late the cost of sin.

*Late, late, so late, and dark the night and chill!
Late, late, so late, but we can enter still.*

Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now.

*No light had we, for that we do repent;
And learning this, the Bridegroom will relent.
Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now.*

*No light, so late, and dark and chill the night!
O let us in, that we may find the light.
Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now.*

*Have we not heard the Bridegroom is so sweet?
O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his Feet!
No, no, too late! Ye cannot enter now.ⁱⁱⁱ*

Now Jesus follows this story with another. The only introduction He gives is to say, "Again, it will be like . . ." *What* will be like? Well, go back to verse one to pick up the subject—the kingdom of heaven. This is another story to provide insight as to how important it is to be ready for the coming of Christ. The first talked about being spiritually prepared, this one about being productively occupied. But this one, too, is directed primarily at the professing church, not the believing church, though, of course, the tares are mixed with the wheat, so it would behoove all of us to pay heed.

The parable of the Talents shows how important it is to be *productively occupied* until Jesus returns. (25:14-30)

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is the Word of the Lord.

A wealthy man entrusts three servants with money to invest, each according to his ability. (14-18) This man, who undoubtedly represents Christ, is obviously a man of means, and he wants to have his resources invested profitably while he is away on a trip of considerable length. It is impossible to know how much money is involved, because it is measured in weight (a talent) and we are not told what is being weighed (gold, silver, bronze?). All that we can say for sure is that five talents was a considerable sum of money in that day, and even one or two talents was nothing to be disregarded. The fact that different amounts are allotted to different servants seems to indicate that the master considers them to have very different levels of ability.

No instructions are recorded, so apparently the master wants the servants to use their own initiative in investing; after all, the conditions could change during his absence. We discover that the first servant immediately sets to work and his diligence is rewarded—he doubles his original capital. The same thing is done by the man with two talents.

But the third servant responds very differently. He takes the money and buries it in the ground. Now frankly, this guy sounds like the smartest of the three in view of our current economy. There are no doubt a good many people here this morning who wish that last summer they had cashed in all their investments and buried the cash in the ground. You'd be far ahead. But needless to say, that would be a misapplication of our parable. Parables are true in general; they are not applicable to every possible circumstance.

After a long time the man returns to settle accounts and lavishly praises the first two servants. (19-23) The period of absence is not specified but it is "a long time," which communicates again the delay in Christ's return. But the day of reckoning finally arrives. The first servant reports that his five talents has become ten, and the master praises both his character and his diligence: "Well done, good and faithful servant." "Well done" is translated by the lexicon as "Bravo!" The servant has done everything the master expected.

Not only does he receive approval, however; he also receives a reward, a promotion, if you will. "You have been faithful with a few things (the master must be very rich to consider 5 talents just a few things); I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" The faithful servant will be rewarded with even greater opportunity to use the abilities and diligence he has shown, plus He will experience great joy in the process. I have little doubt this is Jesus' way of communicating that our level of responsibility and joy in heaven depends to some extent on how we handle opportunities here on earth.

The process is repeated with almost identical wording in the case of the second servant, the one who was given two talents. It is extremely noteworthy that though he gained only two talents he receives the exact same level of praise as the man who gained five. They have both doubled the sum entrusted to them, and they are both congratulated and rewarded for doing so. The actual

size of their gain is not as important as the fact that each has been productive and faithful.^{iv}

I am so grateful for this teaching. We are all on level ground before the Lord, because we are graded not on outcomes but on faithfulness with what we have been given. All of us have the tendency to look at other people who have produced far more than we and thus feel like failures. Or we look at still others who have produced far less than we and feel superior. This parable teaches us that results cannot be graded quite so casually. A developmentally challenged child or adult may actually be more productive for God and thus receive greater reward than some of the Church's finest and most famous, if he or she is more faithful to use all that God has entrusted him or her.

The third servant is condemned on the basis of his own testimony. (24-27) Having heard the commendation of his fellow servants he apparently feels compelled to rationalize his actions even before giving his report: "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you." In effect, he does what many do—shift the blame to the other person. The master's alleged hardness is his excuse for fear and his reason for hiding the money in the ground.

The master, however, calls the servant wicked and lazy. He is wicked because his accusations about the master are untrue, and he is lazy because he didn't even try to produce a profit. You will notice that the master does not acknowledge that he actually is a hard man. In fact, while he seems to admit to harvesting where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered, it may be that he is only arguing that if the servant *believed* that to be the case, whether indeed it was true or not, he should have been even more committed to producing profit.

And he is lazy because it would have been incredibly easy to produce *some* profit. After all, he could have taken the money to the bank and put it in a money market. As of Friday my bank was paying a whopping 1.4% interest, but that's better than nothing! That would have taken no great exertion and the money would have been perfectly safe.

Conclusion: Those who are not productively occupied will lose what they have and be cast into hell. (28-30) In verse 28 the master orders that the one talent be taken from the third servant and given to the one who has ten: "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." This principle is worth some careful consideration. The term "talent" is a serendipitous term. In NT times it referred to a weight, but in our day it has come to mean an ability or a gift. Our modern meaning fits no doubt exactly what Jesus intended to say—that we must use all the talents He has given us or we can expect to lose them. That goes for mental abilities, athletic ability, musical talent, relationships—you name it.

But there is a second, even more severe punishment doled out to this servant in verse 30: "And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Now I must tell you that if I were Jesus I wouldn't have ended the parable

this way. In fact, I have a perfect conclusion to this amazing story that comes right out of Scripture. In 1 Cor. 3:13b-15 we read that “the fire (of the final judgment) will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” What that context tells us is that it is a very dangerous thing to build God’s church with wood, hay or straw, rather than gold, silver, and costly stones. But at least it’s not fatal. If you’re a believer you will still get into heaven by the skin of your teeth! It’s a hard saying, but I can handle it.

But that’s *not* what Jesus says in His conclusion to this parable. On the contrary, the servant who fails to be productive is thrown outside into darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth; in other words he is cast into hell. Who exactly is Jesus fingering here? Is this the lazy believer, the one who fails to use his talent and ability as he should for the Lord? If so, he clearly loses his salvation.

But I do not think Jesus is talking to lazy believers here, any more than He was talking about unprepared believers in the first parable. That would contradict too many passages that tell us that salvation is by grace through faith. I’m not questioning that there are lazy believers in the church, and there are many Scripture texts which chastise them in no uncertain terms. We need to take that to heart. But here I believe Jesus is thinking of the pseudo-believer, the one who is not just under-productive but completely unproductive in the spiritual realm.

I especially want any nominal Christians among us this morning to note something important here. The eternal punishment pronounced over this servant is not due to the fact that he has committed some particularly heinous crime; it’s not because he is a heretic; it’s not because he is an atheist; it’s not because he has embezzled his master’s wealth; rather he is punished because he was given opportunity but declined to use it. His goal was to prevent loss, but in the process he prevented any possibility of gain. And ended up losing everything.

Everyone in this room this morning has the opportunity today to hear the truth of the Gospel, even if you have never heard it before. The Good News is that Jesus Christ was God come in human flesh. He lived a perfect life, He died as a sacrifice for sins, He rose from the dead, He ascended to heaven, and He is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Only those who put their faith and trust in Him will have eternal life. Don’t leave this place this morning without making sure that you personally have received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.

i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, 84.

ii. MacArthur, 88.

iii. MacArthur, 93.

iv. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 630.