

Sermon: Be prepared - the Lord is coming
Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; 1 Thes 4:13-18; Mat 25:1-13
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Introduction

Because I had to preach here and now, I had to prepare of course. In my agenda, you could see 'work on sermon' written on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. Each of those 3 days a few hours, every week. If we need to do so something well, we prepare well.

Those people who live for today only, without taking into consideration what will happen in the future, are usually seen as foolish.

We study today for the exam of next week; we go to school to prepare for later; we decide now about our holiday next year; we work hard in order to make sure that tomorrow the fridge is filled and that in 25 years time, we will have a reasonable pension to continue filling that fridge.

In spiritual life, we must also prepare. If we do not, we are foolish. Let us base our actions of today on what we expect our Lord Jesus Christ to do in the future. He is coming again, to judge the living and the dead. A wise person is prepared.

1. The story - be prepared

Some of you probably came across a small Christian booklet, a black and white cartoon by Jack Chick, called 'This was your life'.

A man dies from a heart attack, and is taken to the throne of God, and there he sees the film of his whole life, from his birth to his heart attack. All the bad things he did, from looking at the girls to sleeping during the sermon in church, and of course he did not believe he needed to be saved. "Everything has been recorded", we are told.

The booklet then shows us that the man is thrown in hell. If only he had prepared himself for death!

Jack Chick has made many similar booklets. He only uses the King James Version, what else. He fumes against Roman Catholics - they are not Christians. He designed and wrote almost 150 similarly scary fundamentalist booklets. On the rapture, end-time prophecies, Israel, Islam etc.

Not my style, but that you already know. But in one thing Jack Chick is right. We do have to be prepared. Jesus himself spoke much about this. 'Stay awake, be prepared, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'

Jesus uses the story of a wedding to show the importance of being prepared.

The story sounds strange in our ears. But listen to this description of a wedding in Palestine 100 years ago. This is recounted by a visitor from England, Dr. J. Alexander Findlay, a Methodist Pastor.

When we were approaching the gates of a Jewish town in Galilee, [he writes] I saw ten girls in festive outfits and playing some kind of musical instrument, as they danced along the road in front of our car; when I asked what they were doing, our guide told me that they were going to keep the bride company till her bridegroom arrived. I asked him if there was any chance of seeing the wedding, but he shook his head, saying: 'It might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a two weeks time; nobody ever knows for certain.'

Then he went on to explain that one of the great things to do at a middle-class wedding in Palestine, was to catch the bridal party napping. So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, and sometimes in the middle of the night; it is true that he is required by public opinion to send a man along the street to shout: 'Behold! the bridegroom is coming!' but that may happen at any time; so the bridal party has to be ready to go out into the street at any time to meet him, whenever he chooses to come. ...

Other important points are that no one is allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp, and also that, when the bridegroom has once arrived, and the door has been shut, late-comers to the ceremony are not admitted.

So, even 100 years ago, Jewish weddings in Palestine were not unlike the story we hear from Jesus. You have to be prepared - look for instance at weddings... If you have not prepared well, you will not be allowed in. No preparation, no feast.

But what do we have to be prepared for?

2.Context of Mathew - prepared for what?

In Matthew 24, Jesus has been warning his disciples that Jerusalem and the Temple are going to be destroyed. And he assured his disciples that their generation would not pass away until all these things had taken place. "But of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only", Jesus says.

Indeed in the year 70 Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. But Jesus seems to speak in wider terms also, about his return to make all things new. And He says, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.... be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

How should we be ready, not knowing when He is coming? Jesus says,

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.

Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know."

And after this, Jesus gives the example of the wedding we are looking at. If you do not prepare well for the wedding, you are not allowed in.

So the story of the ten young girls and the wedding is set in a wider context of Jesus warning us to be ready - and it is about the moment when we will meet with him.

If you know that one day a thief will come and steal your valuables, you make sure your locks are in order today. Even when you do not know the day and the hour when the thief comes.

No, we cannot know when our Lord comes. So any calculations, speculations are useless - yes even a sign of not believing the words of Jesus. No-one knows when he comes.

But we do know that one day we will stand before the Lord of heaven and earth - even though we do not know when - so we better be prepared today. We have good reasons to fear and tremble if we are unprepared.

Surely, the invitation to come to the feast of our Lord is an invitation of grace, completely undeserved. The invitation, in the words of the Scottish Reformed theologian William Barclay, comes 'from 'nothing other than the wide-armed, open-hearted, generous hospitality of the king [William Barclay, Gospel of Matthew, Vol II, NDSB (Westminster, 1975, 2001), p. 313]

But Jesus' parables also make clear that this grace does not mean that preparation is not needed. Our Lord warns us that there are certain things which cannot be obtained at the last minute.

It is easy to leave things so late that we can no longer prepare ourselves to meet with God.

When Mary of Orange was dying, her chaplain thought he had to talk her into the Kingdom of God with some wise advise. Her answer was: "I have not left this matter to this hour." A wise woman. To be too late with God would be an eternal tragedy, even for kings and queens.

Jesus warns us also that there are certain things which cannot be borrowed. The foolish virgins found it impossible to borrow oil, when they discovered they needed it. A man cannot borrow a relationship with God; he must possess it for himself. We cannot borrow a character; we must be clothed with it.

We cannot be living on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. There are certain things we must win or acquire for ourselves.

3.How to be prepared?

So how to prepare?

The parable does not tell us, actually. For this we have to continue listening to Jesus - and next week we will do so again.

But you cannot read any Bible commentary without some discussion about the meaning of the lamp and the oil. Does this not tell us how to prepare?

Or are the lamp and the oil just part of the story to make it a good story. Not all things in the parables have a specific symbolical meaning. For instance, we read that all ten girls fell asleep.

What meaning does this have? That the whole church before the coming of Jesus will be asleep? That seems a bad idea.

Or does the parable teach us that at the wedding of the Lamb, all of us will just be guests? That is impossible for the Apostles hold the image before us that our Lord will be the Bridegroom, and we, his people, will be the Bride! Not just guests.

So not all details in the stories have a spiritual explanation.

But the lamp and the oil have fascinated many. I have usually read and heard that the oil stands for the holy spirit. You may have a lamp, that is, you may have all the outward signs of the christian faith, but if the Holy Spirit is not in your life, then you may end up outside the gate.

So, to be prepared means, to be a true believer with the Holy Spirit in your life.

And who can deny that this is important!

Someone said, "The oil in the parable represents our faith and testimony, our purity and dedication, our good works, and our keeping of covenants—all of the ways in which we have "taken the Holy Spirit for [our] guide."

Some church fathers have other things to say. Listen to St Augustine for instance:

This vigilance should be continuous and unflagging. [...] Watch with the heart, watch with faith, watch with love, watch with charity, watch with good works [...]; make ready the lamps, make sure they do not go out [...], renew them with the inner oil of an upright conscience; then shall the Bridegroom enfold you in the embrace of His love and bring you into His banquet room, where your lamp can never be extinguished. [St. Augustine, Sermon, 3]

So there is some confusion about what it means to prepare! Different people have different views.

Conclusion

Alfred Edersheim a Jewish follower of Jesus Christ, concluded that the foolishness of the five girls consisted in "the entire absence of personal preparation." At least that is clear.

Next week John Span will think a bit further about all this. For now, let us consider the importance of being prepared, and at home this week, think about what you have to do to be prepared for meeting with the Lord - whenever that moment shall be.

The 5 girls were unprepared - so the door was shut. What a warning for us. It tells us that it is all too possible to be in church and in christian company and yet to be a stranger to God himself. That Jesus one day may have to say, 'I never knew you'.

I do not like that surprise when I meet with the Lord. Is he my Lord? Or am I not prepared?

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Amen**