

Proper 27A 2023  
Joshua24; Psalm 78; 1 Thessalonians 4; Matthew 25:1-13  
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Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids

In today's gospel parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, Jesus offers us two-levels of instruction. We can gain insight both on a practical level and a spiritual one. Since first century weddings operated a bit differently than today, and we're not so accustomed to dealing with oil lamps, I think we might get Jesus' point by updating the parable a bit.

Once upon a time, five wise and five foolish business executives went to the airport. The wise executives brought their cell phone chargers and the foolish ones didn't. The plane was delayed. A lot. As calls were made, games were played, statuses posted, and the airline app downloaded, the phones started to run out of juice. The wise executives plugged in their phones. The foolish ones said to the wise, let us borrow your chargers or we won't be able to call our friends for a ride when we finally arrive. But the wise executives answered, we have to charge our phones now, and we need enough battery to call our friends. You'll need to go buy your own charger. Unfortunately, it was now very late, the airport stores were closed, and the electronic vending machines were out of chargers because there had been many foolish executives that day. So the foolish executives decided to leave the airport, run to Sheetz, and buy another charger. By the time they got back, the plane had left, and the next flight was going someplace else. The end.

Looking at the practical advice in this parable, we might think Jesus is an early Boy Scout, telling us to "Be Prepared." Certainly, we are reminded of the wisdom of planning ahead and doing what we need to do. My guess, however, is that we all already knew that it was better to be prepared than not be prepared, so Jesus might also be saying something else. I think there are two other practical lessons here.

The first is for the wise when the moment of crisis comes. The wise are prepared and have what they need, and then the foolish beg, "Give us some of your oil." We are all taught to share, and it seems generally to be a good thing to do. We even have other stories, like the Widow of Zaraphath, whose jug of oil never ran out precisely because she shared it with the prophet Elijah. This oil, on the surface level of the story, is not a life or death matter, however. If people don't have lamp oil, things will be darker. OK. When the bridegroom shows up, the wise might have to shine their lamps so everyone can see them, and that's going to be more comfortable for the people with lit lamps than without, just like if it is raining and only half the people brought umbrellas, the ones with umbrellas are going to be drier, even if they share. Nowhere in the parable, however, are the wise judged negatively for not sharing their oil. This lesson is probably one we need, especially in a world where more and more people are more and more overwhelmed, and especially as we here are mostly people that want to be good people and help when we can. Yet this parable says that when we have done the work to prepare for something important, we don't have to give up that blessing just because someone else shows up in a tizzy later. We can say no. We can draw boundaries. And it is possible to love God, love ourselves, and love others, while saying no and drawing boundaries.

The other practical wisdom here is for the foolish. The issue here is not so much that they didn't have oil. We all mess up sometimes. Maybe they just forgot to bring it, but maybe someone was sick and they were taking care of them and were late and ran out without the it, or maybe the olive crop was bad and they couldn't buy any that week, or maybe they tripped and broke the jar on the road. We don't know and it doesn't matter. But we have all been there at some point. The main problem for them, however, was not that they didn't have oil. The main problem is they didn't accept that they didn't have oil and do what was important in the moment. They were bridesmaids who were waiting for the bridegroom. That was their job. Having oil would have been good, but not necessary. What was necessary was being there. But instead of waiting they left. They missed the plane. Instead of sitting in dimmer light, and not having the fullest experience of a bright, joyful wedding, they tried to make up for everything with a last minute frenzy. Sometimes we just need to manage our own expectations. We aren't perfect. We forget things. We run out of what we wanted. Rather than trying to pretend we can still make it all happen, we can see where we are and do what matters in the moment. Maybe it isn't everything we wanted, but it can be good enough.

Jesus' goal here, however is not to give bridesmaids advice, which is why he told a parable instead of starting a tiktok. He wants to share a spiritual reality. The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids offers three spiritual takeaways for us.

First, and most importantly, we are waiting for Jesus. He is our bridegroom and he is coming back for us. The issue for us is that we don't know when. Honestly, we would probably have liked it if he came back about January of 2020 at the latest, but Jesus' second coming is still coming and not yet here. In the meantime we wait, and do the things that Jesus has told us to do while waiting.

The second spiritual takeaway is that we are supposed to be preparing for Jesus. In the parable, that preparation was getting oil, but for us these activities are those things that give light and love to ourselves and others. We say our prayers; we come to church; we give generously to those in need and to institutions that are doing good work; we care for each other; we do all those spiritual disciplines and acts of righteousness that make the world a better place. As we do these holy activities, we fill our lamps up with oil. When Jesus shows up, we are going to shine in that holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem. We are going to experience laughter and music and amazing food and see people we love, and be entirely comfortable because we will have been living according to the values of the Kingdom of God in this life, and will have no problems adapting to the next.

The third spiritual takeaway is perhaps the hardest to grasp, but no less important. Maybe you've come today and haven't been putting a lot of oil in your lamp over the years. Maybe you haven't been the best at following Jesus' commandment to love God and neighbor. Maybe it seems weird to show up empty-handed with bridesmaids who are lugging five-gallon oil jugs around. Maybe you feel like you need to go out and fix things before you can come back and wait with everyone else. Jesus makes clear in the parable, however, that everyone should stay and wait for him. Nobody gets credit for the good deeds of other people, but the light and love of others can certainly shine into our lives in incredible ways. Will it feel weird? Maybe. Is it going to be different hanging out with people who live like they are waiting for Jesus? It should. But part of

the blessing of being around people with lots of oil is not in borrowing theirs, but in basking in the light they shed. And as we are surrounded by them and live in that kind of community, we miraculously find our own jugs of oil filling up, as well.

We don't all have to have oil in our jars or fully-charged phones. The wise will make sure we get a ride to the place we are going at the right time. And when Jesus picks us up at the airport in his Uber, we are going to be happy to be at his party. He'll shine with plenty of light and isn't checking our oil levels at the door. Just wait for Jesus and look for him. He'll take care of the rest.