



Be Prepared!

Matthew 25:1-13

1. Waiting for the bridegroom (verses 1-5)
2. Called to meet the bridegroom (verses 6-12)
3. Are you prepared? (verse 13).

As a child, I remember putting my head on my pillow, drifting off to sleep, and being awakened by a nightmare! I remember dreaming that someone was chasing me and I was trying to run away, but I simply couldn't run fast enough. It's like my legs weighed 400 pounds each. At other times, I dreamed that someone broke into our house, and I was in my bedroom, and the intruder was breaking down the door. I also dreamed that I was in some danger and tried as hard as I could to cry out for help, but somehow couldn't get the words out of my mouth! Now that I am an adult, my nightmares have reduced in number. Since becoming a full-time preaching pastor, I have had my fair share of nightmares as well. Let me tell you my biggest nightmare of recent days.

Picture me on a typical Saturday evening. After preparing my sermon for Sunday morning, I go to bed late. In my dream, I find myself in front of Rock Valley Bible Church, with my guitar and music. However, my problem is that I haven't yet selected any music to sing. Furthermore, I haven't practiced any songs, but it's time to begin the service. So, I'm up in front, without any plan, without any practice, singing songs, that I don't even know. For me ... that's a nightmare! Other Saturday nightmares find me in front of Rock Valley Bible Church totally unprepared to preach. I look down at my notes, and I can't quite read them. I say something anyway, but can't quite get it out right. I don't really know what I'm saying. Then, I forget what I was saying. And I don't know where I'm going with all of it. For me ... that's a nightmare!

These nightmares of mine in these past few years have come about because of the apprehension that I have about doing something for which I am not quite prepared. My wife has also been susceptible to similar nightmares as well. We were married just after she graduated from U. C. L. A. Early in our marriage, Yvonne would tell me in the morning of the nightmare that she had the previous night. She was taking an exam, but was unprepared. In our text this morning, we will see Jesus describe some people who aren't prepared for His return.

Appropriately, the title of my message this morning is "Be Prepared!" When I say, "Be Prepared!" I'm not talking about being prepared for your activities on Sunday morning. I'm not talking about being prepared for your presentation at work on Tuesday. I'm not talking about being prepared for your exams next week. When I say, "Be Prepared!" I'm talking about being prepared for the return of Jesus Christ to this earth."

The return of Christ has been the theme of our study in the gospel of Matthew over the past month and a half. After giving His disciples the signs of His return, Jesus turned the corner in verse 32 to speak about how we need to anticipate His return. Several weeks ago, we looked at the fig tree, Noah, and the story of the thief in the night. Each of these stories taught us to "**Be ready!**" Last week, we looked at the sensible slave that was blessed for his faithfulness as opposed to the evil slave that was cursed for his wickedness. This story taught us to "**Be faithful!**" This morning, we will examine the story of the ten virgins. This story will teach us to "**Be prepared!**"

We will be looking at the first 13 verses of Matthew 25. Here is our text:

Matthew 25:1-3

Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the prudent answered, saying, "No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy [some] for yourselves." And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. And later the other virgins also came, saying, "Lord, lord, open up for us." But he answered and said, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you." Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

This parable begins (in verse 1) with a common expression of Jesus. He said, "the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who ... went out to meet the bridegroom." Jesus takes this wedding custom and uses it to teach a bit about what the kingdom of heaven will be like. Such a comparison isn't unusual for Jesus. He often described the kingdom of heaven as similar to other common things. In the book of Matthew alone, He described the kingdom of heaven to be ...

- ... like a sower who scatters his seed upon different kinds of soil (Matt. 13:18-23).
- ... like a field in which a man's enemy planted tares (Matt. 13:24-30).
- ... like a mustard seed, that grows to be very large (Matt. 13:31-32).
- ... like leaven in a lump of dough that permeates everything (Matt. 13:33).

- ... like a man selling everything he has to buy a hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44).
- ... like a man selling everything he has to buy the one fine jewel (Matt. 13:45-46).
- ... like a net that drags in both good and bad fish, which are eventually separated (Matt. 13:47-50).
- ... like a man forgiven a great debt (Matt. 18:21-35).
- ... like laborers in a vineyard, who all receive the same wage, regardless of how long they worked (Matt. 20:1-16).
- ... like a king, who invites many people to the wedding feast of his son, though only a few want to come (Matt. 22:1-14).

In our text this morning, Jesus uses the common customs of wedding procedures to teach about the nature of the kingdom. So, as we go through this text, we need to understand that the things that Jesus says here have a greater meaning than simply a story. There is a comparison going on between this story and the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

One of the difficulties of interpreting this parable is to know how far to push the analogies. Some would find symbolic meaning in everything. The fact that the characters are virgins signify something of our purity. The number of virgins signifies something else. The oil has some special significance. Some might also find a meaning for the lamps as well as the sleep.

Even before you get to the difficulties of precise interpretation, there are difficulties in fully understanding the customs of the day that are used in the story itself. There are certainly some things in this parable that strike us as a bit odd. Who are these virgins? Why would they go out to meet the bridegroom? What's up with the lamps? Why the delay in coming? Are these things typical of weddings in Jesus' day? These questions are only due to the differences in culture between our day and the day of Jesus. If you would have been one of the original hearers, these things would not have been odd for you at all. You would have clearly understood what often took place at wedding feasts and realized that Jesus is simply describing some things that take place at a typical wedding.

To illustrate this cultural difference, suppose that Jesus were alive today. He might tell of how the kingdom of heaven is compared to a wedding celebration. "The kingdom of heaven is like a bride and groom, who exchanged their vows and headed out of the church. Many were throwing rice at the bride and groom. But some were throwing rocks. When the groomsmen heard about this, they cast out those worthless fellows 'into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" Now, we would fully understand such a parable. The throwing of rice is a common phenomenon at the end of weddings as the bride and groom leave the church. I'm not sure of the full significance of it, but it certainly is an act of good will toward the bride and groom. But, to throw rocks at the bride and groom would be totally out of place, as it might well harm the bride and groom. It would easily teach us of the many that desire to be a blessing to other people and of the many that would desire to curse others. A couple thousand years from now, perhaps people won't quite understand the custom of throwing rice at the bride and groom as they leave the church. But, the thrust of the teaching would change little.

This is our experience with this parable of the ten virgins. Those who listened to Jesus had little trouble understanding the full significance of what Jesus was describing. They had seen virgins go out to meet the bride groom. They understood the custom of the day. Though we stand at a bit of a disadvantage, the thrust of the story is easy to understand: of the ten that were awaiting the bridegroom, only five were prepared! Those who weren't prepared never made it to the wedding feast! In the broadest of terms, it describes how there are many people who are expectantly waiting for the return of the Messiah! They are anticipating the enjoyment of a big party in heaven when He returns! But, due to their lack of preparation, they will miss out. They will receive no part of the Messiah! They will receive no part of the joys of heaven!

Thus, this parable comes to us with its clear warning! Be prepared, so that you don't miss out.

Let's dig into this parable by looking first at those who are ...
1. Waiting for the bridegroom (verses 1-5).

In verse 1, we are introduced to "ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom." These virgins were waiting for the bridegroom. Marriages in the days of Jesus were obviously a bit different than marriages in our day. First of all, (to give you some background) they were arranged marriages. The parents of children would get together with other parents and determine that it would be a good thing for their children to be married. The groom's parents would pay a dowry to the bride's parents. At this point, the couple was officially **engaged**.

At some point, even years later, there would be an official ceremony in which vows were exchanged and the couple would be officially betrothed to one another. After this ceremony, the **betrothal period** would begin. It would last about a year. Though the marriage was not yet consummated, the couple was officially married. This was the case of Mary and Joseph as told in Matthew 1.

After the betrothal period ended, there would be the **marriage ceremony**. In our culture, bride and groom and friends and relatives all converge upon a church for short wedding ceremony, followed by a nice little reception, after which everyone goes home. In the days of Jesus, weddings and their feasts would often last for several days, at times feasting late into the night.

As this story indicates, there would be a point in the celebration when the bridegroom would come out of his chamber rejoicing (Psalm 19:5) to claim his bride at the wedding feast. During this occasion, he would be paraded through the streets by some virgins, who lit the way with their lamps. All who saw the procession could rejoice with the bridegroom in his day of happiness!

This is what was taking place in the story that Jesus tells. Ten virgins have gone out to meet the bridegroom, to escort him into the wedding feast, where he will be united with his bride. These virgins would be equivalent to our modern day wedding party. Now, I don't believe that there is any significance of the number ten. This was probably a typical number of virgins that would come to escort the groom. Since the wedding celebrations back then were a bit more extensive, it makes sense that the bridal party would be a bit larger than our typical weddings today. But certainly, ten bridesmaids isn't out of the question for us today by any means.

We all can imagine that each of these virgins were certainly excited about the party that was about to take place. They were anticipating the

part that they would play. They were anticipating sharing in the joy of the couple. They were anticipating seeing the joyful face of the bride when they brought the bridegroom to her. Perhaps their enthusiasm was coupled with joyful singing, "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the groom...." Perhaps they were singing, "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burnin', burnin', burnin' ..." ¹ Their happiness and celebration was high! It's a wedding! They were going to be a part of it!

Central to the story that Jesus told is that half of these virgins were wise and the other half of them were foolish, which verse 2 indicates. Again, I don't believe that there is any significance in the fact that five of them were wise and the other five foolish. I believe that Jesus is simply putting forth two different types of people, as He has already done in many of the illustrations surrounding this parable. For instance, back in Matthew 24, verse 40 speaks about the two men in the field: one will be taken, and the other will be left. Verse 41 speaks about two women grinding at the mill: one will be taken, and the other will be left. Verses 45-51 speaks about the two different types of servants: the faithful servant will be rewarded, and the unfaithful servant will be punished. Next week (in the parable of the talents), we will again see of the faithful slaves and the wicked slaves (Matt. 25:14-30). The week after that, we will again see two types of people: the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46).

So, Jesus said that there are two types of virgins: the wise and the foolish. The only difference between them was that the foolish virgins didn't take any extra oil, but the wise virgins did bring some extra oil (we read this in verses 3-4). I suspect that these wise virgins knew a bit about the wedding protocol. They knew that there might easily be a delay in the program as the bridegroom prepares to make his entrance into the feast. As they were waiting, perhaps the bridegroom wanted to remain a bit longer with his family before leaving them. Perhaps he has a few more things to say to his parents or to his friends, who were gathered in their home. Perhaps his fellow bachelor friends would play some tricks on him to delay him. At any rate, these wise virgins knew that such a delay was a real possibility, so they brought a little extra oil, just in case (verse 4).

Indeed, there was a delay. It wasn't a short delay. It was a long delay. In fact, the delay was so long that the virgins all had difficulty staying away. Verse 5 tells us that they all "began to sleep" (verse 5). I'm sure that you know a bit about what this is like. It's late at night, long past your bedtime, but for some reason, you are still awake. Your eyelids feel as if they weigh 500 pounds. When you shut your eyes, it feels so good. Perhaps you have seen someone struggling during a lecture to stay awake. Their eyes begin to close slowly. Their head bobs and jerks them away. (Then the process repeats itself as the lecturer drones on!). Have you ever experienced this? My wife and I say that you are hurting when this happens. (I'm just thankful that none of you have ever experienced this during my preaching.)

This is how the virgins felt. Eventually, all ten of these virgins fell asleep (verse 5). Now, in the Bible, sleeping is often used as a metaphor to denote the lazy man. "How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?" (Prov. 6:9). But, I think that it is wrong to attempt to bring in this imagery here into this parable. You ought to let the local context determine the meaning and extent of the analogy. Jesus didn't say that they were foolish or evil to sleep. I believe that Jesus mentions their sleep merely to demonstrate how long the delay of the bridegroom actually was. The procession was planned for the evening. But, the bridegroom kept delaying, and delaying, and delaying. So much so, that the virgins fell asleep.

The sleep indicates a key point to this parable: there would be a delay in the coming of the bridegroom. The problem in the previous parable (Matt. 24:45-51) was that the master returned too soon! The wicked slave abused his master's absence, thinking that he would delay. The problem in this parable is that the bridegroom delayed! The foolish virgins weren't prepared for the delay. It teaches us a great lesson: We need to be prepared, should the Lord come back soon. We can do this by being faithful today. We need to be prepared, should the Lord delay His coming! We can do this by being wise. Regarding the return of Christ, there are those who foolishly expect Him to return so soon, that they fail to make any long term plans (as is true in this parable). And yet, there are those who see His delay, and fail to be diligent in their faithfulness to the Lord today (as is true in Matt. 24:45-51).

Let's focus our attention now upon those who are ...

2. Called to meet the bridegroom (verses 6-12)

In the middle of the night, there was a call that came out, "Behold the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" To these sleeping virgins, I'm sure that the delay seemed like no time at all! In your slumber, hours pass by very quickly! It was now the time in which the bridegroom needed his escort to the wedding feast (verse 6). Let it be noted that even in a parable about the delayed return of Jesus, there is a sense of the suddenness of His return. When Jesus returns, He will come and awaken us all!

At the news of this call, all of the virgins were certainly awakened and they began to prepare their lamps (verse 7) for their march with the bridegroom. Now, when we think of these lamps, we ought not to think of a genie lamp, with oil inside of a big bottle, which puts forth only a little light from the end. Rather, we ought to think more like torch, which will put forth some good light. These lamps had a rag in them, which was doused with oil. When you lit the rag, the oil would flame up and create a good light. So, as these foolish virgins took their lamps, they quickly discovered that much of their oil had evaporated from the rag. They might find a bit of oil somewhere deep in the rag, but the oil would quickly burn out. This is because the rag wasn't saturated in oil any longer, due to the evaporation over time. Thus, their lamps wouldn't light.

Fortunately for the wise, they simply took out their extra oil, doused the rag in their oil and lit their lamps. They were prepared for the coming of the bridegroom. Unfortunately for the foolish, they had failed to bring any oil reserves. But, they saw that the wise virgins had some extra. In their failure, they sought help from others who had been wise. So, they begged for a little extra oil (verse 8). "Could you please share your oil with us?"

How true to life this is! There are many people who live in foolishness for years, only to find themselves in trouble at some point. Perhaps they are foolish with their finances, racking up debts on their credit cards. Some are foolish with their bodies, abusing them with drugs and alcohol and steroids and over-eating. Others are foolish with their children, neglecting to train them in their most formative years. Some think that their education isn't important, and thus, fail to apply themselves in school. Eventually, their foolish choices catch up to them. Their credit card debts are so overwhelming that they are having difficulty with the necessities of life. Their bodies have been so destroyed that they are beginning to live with constant pain. Their children are rebelling against the faith and causing immense hardship. Or, their career is at a

standstill, because of a lack of education.

As a pastor, I have seen these types of people, come and seek for help, as if they simply happened upon difficulties, over which they had no control! It is typical for these people to call my office on Saturday afternoon looking for help, even though their trouble has been building for months and even years! The crisis comes on Saturday when other means have been exhausted. It wasn't difficult for these foolish virgins to take along a little flask of oil. It doesn't take much oil to keep your lamp burning for a few more hours! But, they were presumptuous. And, it doesn't take much not to spend money that you don't have for things that you don't need! Nor does it take much to stay away from the things that are bad for your body. To spend time with your children, reading the Bible to them and teaching them what it means to love and follow Christ isn't such a difficult thing. Nor is it too difficult to make a bit of sacrifice in your younger years to stay at school. But, a day comes when your poor choices will come back to haunt you! Some of you are experiencing this right now!

Sadly, there is often little that can be done in that day! Even king David paid for his sin with Bathsheba. The LORD told him that his wives would be taken from before his eyes and given to his companion, lying with them in broad daylight. Even upon his confession, the LORD indicated that his consequences would continue: the child would die (2 Sam. 12:14).

For these foolish virgins, help was not available. These wise virgins refused to share their oil (verse 9). At first, you might think that this is a bit rude. But, if they shared, nobody would have enough oil for the parade through the streets (verse 9), and it would bring even greater shame to the bridegroom to walk some of the way in the dark, than marching with only half of the invited virgins. The wise recommended to their fellow virgins to go and purchase some more oil (verse 9). So, they went off to find a solution to their problem. But it was too late, as we will see, when we come to verse 11. That verse describes how the foolish are shut out of the feast.

Before we look at verse 11, I want to apply this into the eternal realm. After all, this is ultimately what this parable is all about! It's about what the kingdom of heaven is like (verse 1). It is certainly true in life that bad choices you make here and now will come to haunt you later. It is also true eternally as well. To be foolish here on earth regarding eternal matters will catch up to you someday! It may just catch up with you on the day when you hear, "the voice of the archangel and ... the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16). It may just be when you see the "sign of the Son of Man appearing in the sky" (Matt. 24:30). It may be when you hear the shout of the Lord "I am coming!" (1 Thess. 4:16). Like many things in life, that day may find you unprepared!

You ask, "How then, can I be prepared?" It's not too difficult, really. In the parable, the issue with the virgins is that they need oil. Simply put, you need "oil in your lamp." What exactly this oil is has caused all types of discussion among Bible scholars and preachers. Some have said that the oil signifies the Holy Spirit. They point to the anointing of priests with oil, as representing their consecrated and spirit-filled lives (Ray Stedman). Some have said that the oil signifies grace (i.e. Matthew Henry). Some have said that it signifies the change that takes place in regeneration (Charles Spurgeon). I'm not sure that we can exactly figure it out. I'm not sure that we ought to press the parable down this far to try to find any symbolism in this at all! But, regardless of what it is, all agree that the wise virgins are those who will be saved and the foolish virgins are those who will be condemned. The oil is an indication of this.

You ask, "How then, can I be prepared?" You can by being saved from your sin, by trusting in the righteousness of Christ, by believing in the name of Jesus, by seeing His sacrifice on the cross as sufficient for your sin, by loving Christ, by following Christ. All of these things are ways to be prepared. Does this describe you? Do you have oil in your lamp? I think especially of the children here among us. Is the oil in your lamp? You can't be relying upon oil in your parent's lamp. You must have oil in your lamp. Your faith in Christ must be real and genuine and personal. If so, then you are prepared for His coming, as those were in verse 10, "... the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut."

What a joyous time this must have been when these five wise virgins. They formed their torchlight procession and marched the bridegroom around the town. Finally, they arrived at the wedding feast and came into the banquet hall to join in the celebration. This imagery is the very imagery used at the end of the book of Revelation to describe the ultimate destiny of those who love Christ.

Revelation 19:6-9

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'"

Heaven is like a marriage feast. I trust that you have all been to wedding receptions before. This one in heaven will be far more enjoyable than the best wedding reception that you have ever attended. This one in heaven will last far longer than the longest wedding reception that you have ever attended. Those of us who will be there won't ever want to leave this reception. But when we do, we, as the body of Christ, will enter into perfect marital bliss with our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ! What a joy awaits us who are trusting in Christ!

In verse 11, we find those who weren't prepared for His coming. The five foolish virgins had been on an errand to retrieve some oil for their lamps. I'm not sure where exactly they thought that they were going to find the oil in the middle of the night. Twenty-four hour convenience stores weren't around back then. Perhaps they awoke some shop owner and requested that he might open up his shop and sell them some oil. By the time that they came upon the wedding feast, they found that the door was closed. They called, "Lord, lord, open up for us" (verse 11). "We have come to join in the wedding feast! We know that we are late. We know that we were unprepared! But, we've purchased our oil now! We come to join the party! As they say, 'Better late than never!' Would you please open the door for us?"

Some of the most terrifying words in all of the Bible come in verse 12, "He answered and said, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'" The clear implication is this: "I'm not letting you into the wedding feast." I say that these are the most terrifying words in all of the Bible because these virgins were fully expecting to come into the wedding feast, but were turned away, because they weren't prepared.

It's one thing for those who know that they lived a wicked, self-centered, sinful life to arrive at the gates of heaven and be turned away and sent to hell. They knew full well that "those who practice such things are worthy of death" (Rom. 1:32). When Jesus was crucified, there were two criminals being crucified with Him, one on his right and one on His left (Luke 23:33). One of them said to the other, "we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds" (Luke 23:41). When you do wrong, and you know it, and you are punished, you aren't surprised. Certainly, you fear the punishment, but it is all expected. But to think that you are innocent, and are invited to the marriage supper, only to find out that you will be condemned is most terrifying thing that you could ever hear in your life.

This parable isn't the only place where the Bible teaches that people will arrive at the threshold of the kingdom, only to be turned away. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that same thing. He said, ...

Matthew 7:21-23

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but 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 cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

In Luke 13 we see a similar teaching. Jesus was going about preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Someone said to Jesus, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" (Luke 13:23). Jesus said, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from'" (Luke 13:24-25).

Here in Luke 13, the setting is a bit different than Matthew 25. It's not a wedding feast. It's the master of the house. Yet, the teaching is the same! There are many who live this life, deluded into thinking that they will reach the pearly gates and golden streets (Rev. 21:21). These many people were seeking to enter (Luke 13:24), but in the end, they will be turned away!

When turned away, they will object! They will begin to say to Jesus, "We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets" (Luke 13:26). They will say, "We were in church every week! We took communion, feeding upon your presence! We heard Steve preach your words to us each week! How much closer could we get?"

To this, Jesus will reply to them, "I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evil doers. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out." The sad reality is that many will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:27-28). This means that many will get close enough to heaven to look in and see the celebrations going on, wishing that they themselves were there. But many will "be cast out ... [where] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (verse 28).

Notice how close these people actually get to the kingdom. They will be close enough to see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets in the kingdom of God. Perhaps they will be able see them through the lattice in door. Perhaps they will be able to see them through some window near the door. But, they will be able to see into the kingdom of heaven! They will be able to see the festivities, hear the rejoicing, and smell the food that is eaten!. They will be the thickness of the door away from the kingdom. Only a few inches! These are professing Christians who will be able to see the celebration of the kingdom of heaven, but ultimately be denied entrance. This is a scary reality!

Think about these virgins. On the outside of things, I'm not sure that you could tell much difference between these wise virgins and these foolish virgins. Each of them were asked to serve as an official escort for the bridegroom. Each of them had accepted the duty. Each of them were awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. Each of them were carrying their lamps, ready to light them. In many ways, these ten virgins loosely describe the church. The church is filled with those have made some type of commitment help the bridegroom. There are many in the church who have expressed a desire for the bridegroom to come. It is those in the church who are expecting to arrive in heaven someday! But as in any church, there is a difference among its people. There was a difference among these virgins. Some brought oil. Some didn't. Some were prepared. Some weren't. In the end, they will be divided. The wise virgins will enjoy the wedding feast. The foolish virgins will not enjoy the wedding feast. Many who are faithful attendees in church today will find themselves outside of the wedding feast on the last day.

This truth is very near and dear to my heart. These are the very things that the Lord used in my life to transform it. See, I grew up in a mainline Protestant church. I heard a lot about Jesus. I heard a some Bible stories. But, I was never really taught the whole council of God. I was never warned with words like these. I was never taught that within the church there were many who are deceived. Jesus here puts the percentage as only half (five of the ten virgins) of the professing followers of Christ will get into the kingdom of heaven. In Luke 13 and Matthew 7, Jesus puts the percentage as less than this. In these passages, Jesus said that few will get in and many will be cast out. I don't think that the exact percentage is important. But I do believe that there will be far more professing Christians failing to enter heaven than we think that there will be.

When I grew up, I was taught that we need to believe in Jesus. As long as we made a profession of some type, we were doing fine. We were never challenged as a congregation to "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; Examine yourselves" (as Paul did in 2 Corinthians 13:5). We were never taught that there very well may be false believers in our midst. Here is what Jesus is teaching us this morning: "Just because someone says that they are a follower of Christ, it doesn't meant that they will enjoy the wedding feast at the end of the age!" They may look a lot like everyone else, but in the end, the Lord will cast them out (Luke 13:28). Just because you say that you are a follower of Christ, doesn't mean that you are a wise virgin. Unless you are prepared for the return of Christ, you may find out that you are actually the foolish virgin.

When I heard this teaching for the first time, it shook me to the bones. It wasn't so much because my life was in rampant wickedness and knew myself to be the foolish virgin. Rather, it was because I had never heard that the Bible warns us so strongly. From that time on, I said, "I

want to be prepared for His coming. I want to be sure that I am a wise virgin, who has my oil." This desire stirred my heart to go to seminary: to learn the Bible for myself. I didn't go with the agenda to be a pastor. And yet, the Lord has seen fit to place me in the role of a pastor. This morning, I want to shepherd your souls by challenging you to examine your heart.

We all are (1) waiting for the bridegroom (verses 1-5). Someday we all will be (2) Called to meet the bridegroom (verses 6-12). The question for you this morning is this:

3. Are you prepared? (verse 13).

Jesus closed this parable with a simple command in verse 13. "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour." Jesus may well delay, but you need to be prepared. It won't work to make preparations for the Lord's coming after He comes. The foolish virgins are an example of this. You must be prepared beforehand. If the Lord came back today, would your lamp burn brightly? Or, would you have to go into town and purchase some oil?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 22, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] I heard James MacDonald use this humorous illustration on his radio broadcast, Walk In The Word, October 15, 2004.