

Be Prepared

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series

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Matthew 25:1–13 (CEB)

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. ²Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but didn’t bring oil for them. ⁴But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.

⁵“When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep.

⁶But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.’

⁷“Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. ⁸But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, ‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.’

⁹“But the wise bridesmaids replied, ‘No, because if we share with you, there won’t be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut.

¹¹“Later the other bridesmaids came and said, ‘Lord, lord, open the door for us.’

¹²“But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’

¹³“Therefore, keep alert, because you don’t know the day or the hour.

Luke 12:35–40 (CEB)

³⁵“Be dressed for service and keep your lamps lit. ³⁶Be like people waiting for their master to come home from a wedding celebration, who can immediately open the door for him when he arrives and knocks on the door. ³⁷Happy are those servants whom the master finds waiting up when he arrives. I assure you that, when he arrives, he will dress himself to serve, seat them at the table as honored guests, and wait on them.

³⁸Happy are those whom he finds alert, even if he comes at midnight or just before dawn. ³⁹But know this, if the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he wouldn’t have allowed his home to be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, because the Human One [i.e., the Son of Man] is coming at a time when you don’t expect him.”

Jesus’ return. Are you ready for it?

This week’s Scripture passages bring to mind two periods in my life. First, I spent some time as a Boy Scout. I didn’t stay with it long enough to get to the upper levels of achievement, but I did get to eat some snake cooked over an open fire. As I recall, it did taste something like chicken. I also learned the Scout motto: “Be Prepared.” Good instruction for life and I think it was drilled into me enough that some of it stuck. “Be Prepared” – that could be title of the parable from Matthew about the ten bridesmaids.

I also worked for awhile as a lifeguard (oh to be young, slim, and fit again!). It was at a local pool. Most of the job is being a nanny – stop running, no fighting, and so on. But you always knew that you were to stay alert, constantly scanning for someone in trouble in the water. “Stay Alert” – that could be the subtitle of the passage from Luke, at the end of which Jesus

Be Prepared. Stay Alert. . . . We are ready to put these teachings to work in our lives and careers. In fact, given the predominance of type-A folks on our congregation, I’d bet staying prepared and alert are second nature for most of us, lessons applied countless times over the years. But how about in our faith, in our discipleship, in our life with Christ? Be prepared and stay alert? For what? What are we preparing for? What are we waiting for?

Simple: the return of our Lord. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:22, *maranatha*, Come Lord! The Aramaic phrase Paul uses is a simple prayer for the return of Jesus, for him to come a second time, at which time God's kingdom on earth will come to its full consummation.

For two millennia, Christians have proclaimed that Jesus would return bringing God's redemptive work to all its fullness. And for two thousand years we've waited . . . and waited . . . waited. Thus, it isn't surprising that some Christians (many suburban Methodists like myself?) have never given the whole thing much thought. Yes, we affirm that Jesus is returning and could at any moment, but do we live that way? For many of us, it just doesn't seem very real and has no bearing on our life as a disciple.

Granted, there are some parts of the Christian family that seem consumed with Jesus' second coming, trying mightily to figure out when and even where. William Miller led Christians to upstate New York, having convinced them that Jesus would return there in 1842. He did not. Then, Miller did some refiguring and they headed back to the caves and fields on October 22, 1844 to await Jesus' arrival. But they waited in vain. The experience became known as "The Great Disappointment." The Seventh-Day Adventist denomination, with 18 million members, is a legacy of Miller's movement. Sadly, Miller and too many others fail to heed Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 that Jesus would return like a thief in the night, which echoes Jesus' own teaching.

If neither ignoring the promise of Jesus' return or obsessing over it is the way to go, then what do we do? These are the things we'll talk about in this series. And we begin with the parable from Matthew: Be Prepared.

Be Prepared

Jesus' tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids in the middle of a long teaching section just before he begins his final journey toward the cross. Jesus has many things to say to his disciples, including his promised return and what he expects of his disciples in the interim. He tells them a story about faithful and unfaithful servants (24:45-51) and then relates the parable of the bridesmaids. It is a straightforward tale. There are ten bridesmaids in all. They are told to wait for the bridegroom. All ten have lamps for the evening but only five have oil also. They all fall asleep (no staying alert here). When the groom gets there, all ten rise and grab their lamps but, alas, the five foolish girls have no oil to light their lamps. They have been caught unprepared. Eugene Boring fills in some of the pieces:

Right at the beginning of the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Jesus tells us that five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The reason why he tells us this from the outset is that we cannot tell this just by looking at them. All ten have come to the wedding; all ten have their lamps aglow with expectation; all ten, presumably, have on their bridesmaid gowns. We would never guess from appearances that half are wise and half foolish.

No, it is not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that sets the wise apart from the foolish—it's the readiness. Five of the bridesmaids are ready for the groom to be delayed, but the other five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start whenever the groom arrives; the foolish have only enough oil for their own timetable. Five are prepared and ready, even for a delay; five are not.

Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.

At the beginning of the life of faith, you cannot really tell the followers of Jesus

apart. They all have lamps; they are all excited about the wedding; they all know how to sing, “Lord, lord.” Deep into the night, when we spot some persons attempting in vain to fan a dying flame to life, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness.¹

Professor Boring is spot on. One could sum up the Christian life in this way: learn to distinguish wisdom from foolishness and then live it! And, thus, it sums up what it means to be prepared for Jesus’ return. Simply do as God has taught us, for God is Wisdom – love him and love others more every day, in all that we do and all that we say. This is what it means to Be Prepared. If we are growing in our discipleship every day, then every day we are becoming more prepared.

Stay Alert

Though the topic is the same, Jesus puts a different emphasis in the brief parable of Luke 12:35–38. Here too, the setting is a wedding feast. And the servants are to keep their lamps lit and stay ready to serve. No sleeping here. These folks are not only to be prepared; they are to stay alert. They don’t want to be caught unaware. For as Jesus says, “the Son of Man is coming at a time when you don’t expect him.”²

Certainly, one of the most striking moments in Jesus’ brief parable is when the bridegroom, finding the servants ready and waiting, reverses roles and proceeds to serve them. I guess it shouldn’t surprise us, given that Jesus came “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). But still, it takes one’s breath away.

Alan Culpepper provides some helpful background on this parable. (The “parousia” Culpepper refers to is Jesus’ second coming. The word is Greek and refers to an arrival or an official visit by an emperor or such).

Verses 35–40 contain at least the rudiments of two parables: (1) servants awaiting the bridegroom and (2) the householder. The first assures blessing on the faithful; the second warns of judgment on the unprepared. To gird one’s loins (which the NRSV translates as “Be dressed for action” and Fitzmyer renders “Keep your aprons on”) means literally to draw up the long outer garment and tuck it into the sash around one’s waist or hips so as to be prepared for vigorous activity. As an exhortation to readiness it appears prominently in the instructions for the celebration of the first Passover (Exod 12:11; cf. 1 Pet 1:13). The lamps in the tabernacle were to be lit with pure oil so that they would burn steadily (Exod 27:20; Lev 24:2). The exhortation to keep your lamps burning and be ready for the master echoes the parable of the wise and foolish maidens in Matt 25:13, but the theme of readiness for the returning master also occurs in Mark 13:33–37. The situation assumed in v. 36 is that the master of the house has gone to his bride’s home to be married. His servants await his return so that they may open the door for him when he knocks (see Rev 3:20), but they do not know when he will come.

Verse 37 is a beatitude announcing blessing on those who are watchful. In the parable setting, the danger is that the servants may fall asleep (Mark 13:36). In Luke the disciples occasionally sleep when they should be awake, watching and praying (Luke 9:32; 22:45–46). Watchfulness is marked by prayer, while sleep indicates neglect and unpreparedness.

The promise of the master’s generosity toward his servants takes the form of a dramatic reversal of roles. Instead of serving the master, the servants will find that he serves them. Now the master (rather than the servants as in v. 35) will gird his loins and serve the servants (see Luke 17:7–10; John 13:1–17). The master’s invitation to the servants to sit at table is an allusion to the great eschatological banquet (see Isa 25:6; Luke 13:29; 14:15–24).

Verse 38 reiterates the beatitudes but adds the need for watchfulness even late

¹ Boring, M. E. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Matthew. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 8, p. 451). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

² Thus, it always has seemed to me that the more world events make you think Jesus is coming, the less likely it is that he actually will. . . . just a thought!

into the night. Jewish and Greek practice was to divide the night into three watches, while the Romans marked the passing of the hours from 6:00 P.M. until 6:00 A.M. with four watches (see Mark 13:35). Whichever system Luke assumes, the point is the same. If the master finds his servants ready and watchful, even at a late hour, those servants will be blessed. This exhortation clearly conveys an allegorical allusion to the expected parousia and promises that those who are ready at the Lord's return will be blessed by their Lord. Less clear is the issue of whether the mention of the late watches in the night should be understood as a reference to the delay of the parousia (see 2 Pet 3:3–4, 8–10).

The second parable (v. 39) warns of the alternative. For some the master's coming will be like the approach of a thief in the night (see Mark 3:27; *Gospel of Thomas* 21). This image occurs elsewhere in the NT in reference to the expectation of the parousia (Matt 24:43–44; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15). The apocalyptic imagery appropriately yields to a reference to Jesus as the coming Son of Man. Jesus warns his audience, therefore, to be ready. From instructions in earlier contexts, the reader may assume that readiness means trust in God as a heavenly Father, putting away all hypocrisy, handling one's material possessions faithfully, obeying the ethic of the kingdom, and making life a matter of constant prayer.³

A good beginning and a good end

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . ." Most also know that God pronounced it good: "And God saw that the light was good; . . ." God created all that is -- all matter, all energy -- and, not surprisingly, it is a good creation. The final chapters of Revelation are a vision of Jesus' return and God's restoration of his creation. When Revelation ends, the cosmic warp and distortion of sin has been washed away; creation again is as God created it to be. That is why we fervently await the return of our Lord.

Yet, despite this, we humans seem to be drawn to the idea that the physical world is somehow inferior to the spiritual or, as some might say, "it is our souls that really matter, our bodies are just smelly, easy-to-break vessels for our souls." But this is not the Christian view.

Why does this matter? It matters for more reasons than I could touch on here, but let's look at one. Embracing the goodness and the inherent value of God's creation helps us to understand and to accomplish the work God has given us. This world is not a place to be escaped from or even tolerated as we await our trip to heaven. Yes, the world is in much need of renewal and restoration. There is often little evidence of God's kingdom. But our charge is to do all we can to make God's kingdom evident to all. We can't build the kingdom, that is God's work, but we can build *for* the kingdom. Every kind touch, every mouth we feed and body we clothe, every act of selfless giving, every word of truth, every work of beauty we create, all compassion, all sacrifice -- none of it will be lost, all of it will be incorporated into God's renewal of creation, a restoration of the physical *and* the spiritual.

But we should never forget that at "The End," stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God's promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God's colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever. . . . *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

³ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 9, pp. 262–263). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What difference does it make to your life that Jesus will one day return? How might it change if you lived each day in light of the chance that Jesus could return that day?
2. How can we go about making ourselves better prepared for Jesus? You might talk about whether is really any different than simply growing in our discipleship, learning and living what it means to be people of love.
3. How is “staying alert” different from “being prepared”? Are they really? If so, what does it mean, in a practical sense, to stay alert for Jesus’ return?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Matthew 25:36-44 No one knows the day and hour of Jesus’ return.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 25:31-46 The whole world will be judged when Jesus returns.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 13:5-27 Keep watch!</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 All will be brought into the light when the Lord returns.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 Those who are alive when Jesus returns will be changed in the twinkling of an eye.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

