

Parables Of The Kingdom

“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Matthew 24:36 ESV)

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” (Matthew 25:1 ESV)

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.” (Matthew 25:14 ESV)

The Parable Of The Ten Virgins

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Matthew 25:1-13

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Matthew 25:1; that's on page 830 in your pew Bibles. It was just over a month ago – a month and two days to be precise – that we finished up our journey through 1 and 2 Peter. I was then away on missions for 3 weeks and then took a week of vacation to recover and now here we are just 3 weeks away from Easter if you can believe that – so I decided to use these 3 Sundays to look at some of the things that Jesus said in the week leading up to his death and resurrection.

Keep your finger on Matthew 25:1 and scan back in your Bibles to Matthew 24:1 – because that is where the story that we are looking at this morning really begins.

It is Passover Week and Jesus and the disciples have been going in and out of Jerusalem from where they were staying just outside of the city in a place called Bethany. As religious Jews they were participating in services and events in the temple and as they were coming out of the temple one day the disciples were marvelling over the grandeur and apparent permanence of the temple buildings and Jesus said to them:

“You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” (Matthew 24:2 ESV)

Well that got the attention of the disciples. They couldn't imagine anything more catastrophic than the destruction of the temple, so they asked Jesus:

“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

The disciples assumed that the destruction of the temple would bring about the end of all things and the beginning of the eternal kingdom of God.

But Jesus knew that it wouldn't.

Jesus knew that the destruction of the temple was the beginning of the end but NOT the end of the end and so he began to speak to them about the possibility of a very long delay.

He wanted them to understand that when weird stuff started happening in their lifetime it was not necessarily the end of the world - look quickly at verse 8; he says:

All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. (Matthew 24:8 ESV)

This isn't the end, Jesus says. It is just the beginning of the end. It is just the sort of upheaval and dislocation that prepares the WAY for the birth of the baby. You don't want to go to the hospital when the contractions are 20 minutes apart. That's a rookie mistake. You only want to go to the hospital when those contractions are 5 minutes apart.

That's what Jesus is saying here in this sermon.

He is beginning to introduce the idea of a very long delay.

It could be a 10 years. It could be 100 years. It could be 1000 years. It could be 10,000 years or even more. No one knows, Jesus says. Look at verse 36:

"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Matthew 24:36 ESV)

No one knows!!

That has to be one of the most INTERESTING verses in all the Bible! What does it MEAN that the Son doesn't KNOW something that the Father knows? Wow! Theologians say that has to do with the reality of Jesus' TWO natures – Jesus is TRULY GOD and TRULY MAN and as a TRUE HUMAN BEING there were things he legitimately DID NOT KNOW.

Have you ever thought of that?

Charles Spurgeon said here:

"Even Christ, in his human nature, so voluntarily limited his own capacities that he knew not the time of his Second Advent. It is enough for us to know that he will surely come; our great concern should be to be ready for his appearing whenever he shall return."¹

So I think the point is obvious: To be human is TO NOT KNOW the time of Christ's return. That is part of the human experience. That is part of the INTENDED CHALLENGE of faith. Faith IS by definition, being faithful to God in the midst of some uncertainties. That's why we call it FAITH and not SIGHT.

It's not FAITH if you know all the answers.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew: The Gospel Of The Kingdom* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2013), 373-374.

It wouldn't have been FAITH if God told Abraham exactly WHEN Sarah would have a baby.

And it wouldn't be FAITH if Jesus told his disciples exactly WHEN he would return to this earth.

So he didn't.

Instead, he told them a bunch of parables.

The first one is found in Matthew 24:42-44; that one is about how the coming of Jesus will be UNEXPECTED by most of the people on the earth.

The second one is found in Matthew 24:45-51. That one is about wise and foolish servants. In it the Master goes away for an extended period of time and the wise servant attends to his duties while the foolish servant gets drunk and beats his fellow slaves. Look at verse 50:

the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know 51 and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:50-51 ESV)

Ok – so that's BAD. This second parable is about how important it is for servants to attend to their assigned duties no matter how long the Master is away.

That brings us to the third parable – the one we know as the Parable of the 10 Virgins.

Here now the Word of the Lord, beginning at chapter 25 verse 1.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ 10 And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. 11 Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12 But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ 13 Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25:1-13 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well, we had a fair bit of introduction this morning, but that's ok, because actually, this parable is incredibly straightforward and really only adds one new thing to everything that we've learned thus far. The unique contribution of this parable turns on some of the peculiar details of first century Jewish weddings. It seems that there were some initial ceremonies that took place at the bride's home and the groom would go to attend to them with a few close friends. The majority of guests would wait at the groom's home where the main celebration would occur. Thus the 10 virgins have been appointed to parade the groom as he returns from the bride's house. However, the point of the parable hinges upon the unexpected delay in the groom's return. He is gone much longer than anyone expected. The foolish virgins apparently did not take an extra flask of oil with them – they had only the oil in the actual body of the lamp. Thus the long delay PROVED their foolishness. Those who took extra oil were considered wise for having counted on the possibility

of an extended delay.

That is the point of the parable.

D.A. Carson puts it this way:

“There is no point in seeing hidden meanings in the oil or sleep. The sole distinction between the two groups is this: the wise bring not only the oil in their lamps but an extra supply in separate jars ... The wise are prepared for delay; the foolish expect to meet the groom, but are either utterly unprepared or unprepared if he is delayed. And the bridegroom is a long time coming.”²

Let me repeat that last sentence:

And the bridegroom is a long time coming.

That is what I want us to be thinking about today.

What if the bridegroom is a long time coming?

What if Jesus isn't coming back for another 50 years? Or another 100 years? Or another 10,000 years?

How should we be living?

What should we be doing differently?

That is the question we are supposed to be thinking about as we wrestle our way through this parable.

Now – I know that there are also parables – in this section of the text – telling us to be **READY AT ANY TIME**. Well **NOW IS A TIME** so obviously we should be ready **NOW**. I get that.

But just as obviously, this parable is telling us to be prepared for the fact that Jesus **MIGHT BE** a very long time in coming.

And so **CLEARLY**, to be a human – to be a person of faith – is to live one's life **BETWEEN** those two realities. Ready at any moment – but also prepared for a very long delay.

And I think that we evangelicals tend to ignore the second half of that equation. I was raised in a church that emphasized the “ready at any moment” aspect of this tension. I heard tons of sermons and youth messages about how Jesus could return at any moment. I expected at some point to see airplanes crashing to the ground as evangelical pilots were raptured right out of the cockpits of their Boeing 747's.

I was raised on that.

But I don't ever remember hearing a single sermon asking the question: how should we live in

² D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13 Through 28* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 513.

light of a potentially LONG DELAY.

I don't remember anyone ever asking that question.

And so, I want to ask it this morning; I want to ask the question: If Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then how ought we to be living as individuals and as a church?

That's what I'm asking.

Now – I know that we could preach a sermon called “What If Jesus Were Coming Back In 5 Minutes?” – That would be fine – that would be helpful – but that isn't what today's text is asking. Today's text is asking us to consider the possibility of a very long delay.

So let's do that.

If Jesus Isn't Coming Back For 10,000 Years:

If Jesus isn't coming back for 10,000 years – how then should we be living? As individuals and as a church – I've been wrestling with that and I'd like to get you wrestling with that by suggesting the following 5 things.

First of all, and I think fairly obviously, if Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then:

1. We ought to be having lots and lots and lots of babies

I'm sure you saw the headlines in Newsweek and other publications back in February of this year when Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez questioned whether or not it was still ethical and appropriate for people to be having children. I'm quoting here from Newsweek:

“Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York suggested this weekend that it may not be ethical to have children, given the difficulties that climate change will likely cause in the years to come.

In a live stream on her Instagram, Ocasio suggested to her 2.5 million followers that the answer was not clear.

“There's scientific consensus that the lives of children are going to be very difficult. And it does lead young people to have a legitimate question: Is it OK to still have children?” she asked.³

I'm not even sure what to say to that. This is an elected official of the most powerful nation on planet earth telling 2.5 million – mostly young followers – that it might not be ethical for them to have children.

Wow.

And of course she is operating out of her personal theology – out of her personal eschatology. Everyone has an eschatology – a thought or a belief about how things will end. Clearly Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez believes that we are heading for an environmental apocalypse. She is sure that oceans will rise and nations will fall and therefore, on the basis of that belief she thinks that NOW is the time to stop having children.

Now I want to be clear – I am not saying anything about the human contribution to climate change. I am sure that all of our giant SUV's and all of our flatulent cows are in fact having a

³ <https://www.newsweek.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-aoc-climate-change-have-kids-children-1342853>

detrimental influence on our planet's climate. I don't doubt that. But I don't believe that we are headed for an imminent climate catastrophe on the scale being predicted by this young Congresswoman.

For one simple reason.

The Bible says that until the coming of the Lord in Judgment, seedtime and harvest will continue on the earth without interruption. That's in Genesis 8:22:

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. (Genesis 8:22 ESV)

So – until Jesus comes back the earth will not fail to have seasons and it will not fail to produce food. Jesus seems to say something similar in Matthew 24. Look at Matthew 24:38-39. There Jesus says:

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24:38–39 ESV)

So – right up until the time that Jesus comes back – right up until the end - people will be EATING and DRINKING and even getting MARRIED so while I'm sure we can all do better in terms of our stewardship of the planet – I just can't quite buy into the doomsday scenario being advocated by folks like Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. And therefore – I would suggest that we all ought to be having LOTS and LOTS of babies.

If Jesus isn't going to be coming back for 10,000 years - and if the secular materialists are going to stop having babies – then what an opportunity for us as Christians to FILL THE EARTH with little boys and girls who love Jesus – that's what I say.

And if we are past that particular stage of life – or if for one reason or another we cannot ourselves have lots of babies – then let's as a community work together and support each other in the having, raising, loving and discipling little people who love Jesus.

Let's make this church a great place to have and raise a baby – and let's do that BECAUSE we believe in the future. A future that might even be much longer than many of us have been led to expect or believe.

Alright – I'll move quicker now with numbers 2 through 5, I promise.

Secondly, if Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then obviously:

2. We ought to be investing in leadership development

Listen, if Jesus were coming back on Thursday then it would make the most sense to have the most gifted and best trained people doing the most important ministry in this church.

Right?

I mean, think about it, if you brought your friend out to church this morning and they put their

kids in CM and this was going to be the LAST TIME they would ever hear the Gospel before Jesus came back to the earth then OBVIOUSLY we would want to have our very BEST PEOPLE serving in Children's Ministry this Sunday morning wouldn't we?

BUT what if he wasn't coming back for 10,000 years?

Well then, we'd probably want a mix of veterans and trainees in there wouldn't we? We'd want to have some 15 year olds serving in CM this morning – even though they probably wouldn't do as good a job.

And we'd want to have a pretty expansive intern program at the church too wouldn't we?

With what we spend on our intern program every year we could probably hire another fairly competent associate pastor. If we knew for sure that Jesus was coming back in 365 days then we would definitely do that. But what if he wasn't coming back for 365 years? In that case, the intern program makes a lot of sense.

If Jesus ISN'T coming back for a while, then the emphasis HAS TO BE on leadership development – that's what I'm saying.

Thirdly, if Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then obviously:

3. We ought to care more about buildings, property and institutions

The argument for NOT caring much about buildings, property and institutions is usually that the money and time invested in those things would be better spent sharing the Gospel NOW with our friends and neighbours and with lost people in other parts of the world.

That's a solid argument.

If Jesus is coming back in the next 10000 DAYS.

But if Jesus isn't coming back for another 10000 YEARS then the argument begins to look a little short sighted.

We are going to need church buildings and we are going to need seminary campuses and even denominations if we are going to be at this whole Great Commission thing for another 10,000 years.

Let me put it to you this way:

If I knew for sure that Jesus was coming back in 5 years I would want us to put 80% of our budget into evangelism and foreign missions. Obviously we would need to keep a few trainers and teachers on staff and obviously we would need to keep the building heated, but other than that, I would want to put ALL our money into the field – NOW.

BUT.

If I knew that Jesus wasn't coming back for 5,000 years I would want to buy that piece of

property beside our building. I would want to build a seniors' residence there or a seminary – or both.

That's what I'm talking about.

Those things MATTER MORE when you lengthen out the time frame.

Fourthly, if Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then obviously:

4. We ought to emphasize perseverance, anonymity and community

I think that if we knew that Jesus wasn't coming back for 10,000 years it would affect how we disciple our children and our new converts in this church. Let me put it this way – it is sort of like deciding as a car company whether or not to emphasize economy or quality. If you want to mass produce cheap and affordable cars – and there is certainly nothing wrong with that – then you build a certain type of assembly plant. But if you want to produce cars that will last for 500,000 kms then you build a different type of assembly plant.

That's what I mean by perseverance.

I'm not sure we emphasize that as much as we should with our kids.

Do we tell our kids that they should expect to live hard lives of service, largely on the margins of society, and that they should expect sickness, injustice, difficulty and death – but if they PRESS THROUGH THAT, if they hold on to their faith in Christ and if they serve Christ, no matter what comes, they will be saved?

Do we use that kind of language?

Because Jesus did. He said – in this section of teaching:

the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13 ESV)

He taught about perseverance because he knew we would need it in the event of an extended delay.

And I think we would talk more about anonymity. Famous people live during times of crisis and decision. The disciples are famous because they were the first generation of Christians. I imagine that there will be other great heroes associated with the last generation of Christians. In heaven I'm sure we will want to visit with the Apostle Peter and talk to him about being crucified upside down. What was that like? Did it hurt more or less? Did you see Jesus? How did he sustain you?

And I'm sure we will want to talk to the heroes of the last generation. Those who will be tortured, beheaded and drowned during the Great Tribulation or Satan's Little Season or whatever you want to call it.

But what about the faithful, anonymous people who lived in the times between?

There will be a lot of those people and we probably ALL better be prepared to be among them.

If Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then your ambition ought to be something closer to what the Apostle Paul counseled back in 1 Thessalonians 4:

aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 ESV)

Live quietly. Work hard. Love Jesus. Die and be forgotten.

We don't tend to use that kind of language with our kids and new converts – but if Jesus isn't coming back for 10,000 years – then shouldn't we?

And we ought to emphasize community because Jesus never promised that we would be here when he returned – but he did say that the church would be here when he returned. He said:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

If Jesus is coming back in 5 years then your story, your ministry and your opportunities are really, really important, but if he isn't coming back for 5000 or 10,000 years then OUR STORY, OUR MINISTRY and OUR OPPORTUNITIES are really, really important.

I'm not sure we say that often enough to our kids and new disciples.

And then lastly, if Jesus isn't coming back for another 10,000 years then obviously:

5. We ought to have our eyes fixed a little further down the road

I mentioned last Sunday night that my son is taking driver's ed. That's a terrifying thought isn't it? Our kids are growing up and one of the things that I've been teaching Max is the importance of looking further down the road than by instinct we feel inclined to do as drivers. When you first get into a car you tend to look at the road right in front of your headlights don't you? But if you do that it makes it very hard to steer a straight and steady course. Instead you need to be looking about 15-20 seconds down the road, they say, depending on how fast you are driving.

That's a learned skill for a new driver, isn't it?

It feels wrong.

It feels unsafe.

And yet, it is the wisest and safest thing to do.

And so it is in the spiritual life.

You need to be ready for whatever might come barging out of those bushes in your peripheral view but you need to be LOOKING and FOCUSING much further and much longer down the road in front of you.

That's the only way to drive and it is the only way to live.

You've got to think about the future. The Book of Proverbs says:

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.
(Proverbs 13:22 ESV)

As in your family, so in the family of God.

No one knows the day or the hour or the month or the year or the decade or the century or the millennium of his coming.

Not you.

Not me.

Not the angels.

Not even the Son of Man.

Only God the Father knows that bit of information.

So then, let's be ready; let's be wise and let's prepare for the possibility of a very long delay.

Let's pray together.