

Edinburgh, Scotland, is famous for a story of a dog and his owner that express devotion and tenacity in equal measure. The story began in 1850, when John Gray came to the city to be a gardener. Unable to find work, he joined the police force as a night watchman. To keep him company through the long nights, he would take his small Skye terrier named Bobby with him on his rounds. They became part of the living landscape of the city night after night for years.

John later contracted tuberculosis and died in the winter of 1858; he was buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard. What happened next became legend in the city. Bobby, the Skye terrier, would not leave his master's grave. Except for accepting midday meals from the kind people in the area, Bobby stayed there day and night with his master. The caretaker tried on many occasions to evict the dog, but to no avail. Finally, he provided the little dog with a shelter by the grave.

When the city passed an ordinance that all unlicensed dogs would be destroyed, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, William Chambers, purchased a license for Bobby and had a collar engraved for the little dog. Until his death fourteen years later, the citizens cared for Bobby while he guarded his master's body. If you walk to Greyfriars Kirkyard today, you can't miss the statue that stands across the street. It is a sculpture of Bobby with these words inscribed on the base:

Greyfriars Bobby—died 14th January 1872—aged 16 years. Let his loyalty and devotion be a lesson to us all.

Anyone who has ever owned a dog knows how loyal and devoted they can be. ... The story of Hachi is another example. Hachi's owner... Parker

Wilson would step off the train everyday after work... only to find Hachi there to greet him. Hachi would listen for the train whistle and then run to the train platform. Every single day... this was routine.

(Keeping the story short... here) one day Parker Wilson had a massive heart attack and died while he was at work. Unaware what has happened... Hachi waited for hours at the station for his master to step off the train. ... For the next ten years this loyal dog waited at the train platform each evening.

I hope that you will not think of me as being disrespectful... with what I am about to say... But I have to think that Christ expects this same kind of dog-like loyalty and devotion from us. Would you agree? ... This seems to be the point that Jesus made in the passage we will be studying this morning.

Let me take you to the final verse of our passage. This is the focal point of today's teaching...

Matthew 25:13

What does Jesus mean by “watch”... “watch therefore”...? It means to remain adamant (unyielding) in your allegiance and dedication to Him. ... Although Christ's delay may be long, His return in judgment will be sudden and irreversible... so we must be prepared by trusting Him now with a persevering faith that bears fruit.

We have been studying... in recent weeks... the Olivet Discourse in Matthew chapter 24. As we continue our study of Matthew's gospel... today we open the 25th chapter and continue with the same discussion that Jesus is having with His disciples.

It all began... when the disciples asked Jesus : *“When will this happen?”* (that not one stone will be left on top of another... or... in ***their*** minds... the destruction of the temple)... *“What will be the signs of your coming again... and when will the world come to an end?”* (Matthew 24:3)

Their concern was for their own people... the Jews... and the epi-center of everything Jewish (the temple.) ... So Jesus has been discussing with them end time events – particularly as they relate to the Jewish nation.

Jesus told his disciples that He would come back... and that His second coming would be visible for all to see. ... He... the Son of Man... would come on "the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." ... On that day — it could be today... tomorrow... or a thousand years from now — the angels will gather Christ's elect from the ends of the earth.

These are grand and glorious truths to bank our futures on... ... but what do they mean for our lives **now**... (at this moment)...? ... How does the reality of Christ's return affect the way we should think and feel right now?

The answer to these questions begins in Matthew 24:36, and it runs all the way through the end of Matthew 25. ... Jesus tells parables and stories to help us understand how we should live in light of His coming.

Once Jesus returns, it will be too late to rethink your life and your priorities. **His judgment will be irreversible**, and there will be no second chance to repent. The stories Jesus tells in the remainder of chapter 25 illustrate this point. There are servants who are not ready when their master returns, so they are cast out into darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (24:45-51).

In the story we will look at today... bridesmaids (called "virgins") are locked out of a marriage feast... and the door is shut... never to open for them.

I have been saying that the "atmosphere" of the sections we have studied so far of the Olivet Discourse... was definitely Jewish. But starting with the 25th chapter... the "atmosphere" changes. ...Jesus had been describing the sign-events of the Tribulation period... and had named one judgment after another... culminating in His return to earth. His return was detailed in verse 27-31 of chapter 24... and Jesus had addressed the immediate question of "when" that His disciples were wondering about. But they would still have some concerns... so the last time we were together in Matthew... we saw how Jesus addressed that the Jewish nation would not be wiped out entirely – before His return.

So as we open chapter 25 today... Christ is still talking about the end time event of His return... but now He broadens it out a bit. Remember Jesus will return in **two stages**. First He will (unexpectedly) return in the clouds... and all of His followers will be caught up in the air... and will be with Him forever. (This is known as the "rapture." ... But events will still be happening here on earth... as God redeems the Jewish people... bringing them back to Himself... primarily through the Tribulation. ... Then after the tribulation... once the Jewish leaders... as a whole... recognize that Jesus **IS** the Messiah... and cry out to Him... He will return.... And establish His long-awaited Kingdom on earth. (We have covered all of this in previous week's messages.)

The parable that we are about to read – I believe – concerns itself (also) with the **first** part of Christ's return – when we are raptured away from this

earth... before the Tribulation. (Now we are learning about both stages of Christ's return.)

Matthew 25:1-13

Let's get caught up with some cultural information that will help us better understand this parable...

Marriage "ceremonies" in Jesus' day were conducted with great pomp and ceremony. Both the bridegroom and bride were attended by friends. (From what I can tell by piecing together several of my sources that provide slightly different information)... The wedding had three parts.

First... the ceremony of marriage was performed commonly in the open air... on the banks of a stream. After the ceremony... a two-stage feast occurred. They first would go to the father of the bride's house... for seven days of feasting there. (If she was a widow... it would only be three days.) Near the end of the feasting at daddy's house... the honored friends who are the groom's attendants... would go to his house and prepare it to receive the bride (and probably for the next part of the feast.)

They are away from the party and do not know exactly when the groom... and the celebratory procession would come... bringing his bride to where they will live. The bridegroom would arrive at the moment of his own choosing.

According to William Barclay... one of the great things to do in a middle-class wedding... was for the bridegroom to try and catch the bridal party napping. ... The custom was that it would always be at night. Sometimes

he might even come in the middle of the night... (as in Jesus' story)... so the groom's attendants would have a lookout who would announce, '*The bridegroom is coming.*' That was the signal for the groom's attendants to join in the traditional ceremony... by coming out of the house with lit torches... meet the groom and those who accompanied the bride on the road... and light the way for them as the groom brought his new bride into their house for the first time.

It probably would seem strange to us... because (in our culture)... at this point we would give the bride and groom their privacy. But **our** customs and conventions... were not **theirs**. ... The party continued once they reached the couple's new home. (I don't know for how much longer. ... If it were me... the minute we got to the door... I'd thank everyone for coming... and send them home. Out!... Out!... Out! But again... I am most familiar with our culture's norms.

All of this was carefully orchestrated tradition – so it brought shame to the groom... if his attendants were ever to break it... especially because they were negligent. Being an attendant for either the bride or the groom was a great honor. To be insultingly unprepared... was unthinkable! It would show the lack of regard they had for the groom.

Matthew 25:1

Those who will help serve at the wedding are called “virgins.” We would call them bridesmaids... young women (girls) who are not yet married. ... These virgins... doubtless... represent the church — a fitting name... because Jesus sees the church (as a whole) - pure and holy.

Matthew 25:2-4

These young women were the groom's attendants... who had the assigned role of preparing the home for the groom and his bride... and to escort them to it. ... But there is a difference between the attendants. The difference between the two groups comes out in verses 3, 4. ... It is preparedness and lack of preparedness... more specifically... it is preparedness and lack of preparedness for the unexpected.

Notice that **all ten** have oil. ... In verse 8... the foolish said that their lamps were going out. So... they had oil... but it wasn't enough. Why is that important...? ... (Why would I point this out...?)

Because... the original oil that runs out... can't represent... (as some think)... saving faith... good works... or the Holy Spirit... I have heard it taught that way... and numerous times this week... I read in commentaries that the oil represents saving faith... good works... or the Holy Spirit ... But it can't... unless... of course... we believe that true Christians can lose their salvation... (which doesn't fit well with the bridegroom's final words in verse 12)...

Matthew 25:12

Jesus said... "**do not** know you" ... not ... "**no longer** know you."

Honestly... I think we do a dis-service to Christ's parable... by concentrating so much attention on what the "oil" in the story represents. (LISTEN!) The oil is **secondary** to the oil-keepers... both the foolish and

the wise ones. Being prepared or not being prepared is the emphasis... not the torch... or the oil that burns on it.

Kent Hughes writes:

Think of two drivers with a pickup truck each. One driver has a filled gas can in the back of his pickup; the other driver does not. When the first driver runs out of gas on a deserted desert road, he can simply grab that can, fill up the tank, and keep going—because he is prepared to run out. The other driver, on the other hand, is stuck in a dangerous and potentially deadly situation.

The five wise virgins are like the driver with the extra can of gasoline.

Rather than what the oil represents... here is what we need to set our minds upon: Those wise young women were prepared because they longed for the future feast with the bridegroom. They set their hearts upon honoring Him. The foolish young women had such a **low** regard for Him... that they were willing to risk shaming Him. They put forth minimal effort... because they did not revere Him like the wise attendants.

This suggests that not every professing Christian... who may have prayed a prayer... or had some emotional experience... or has been tied to a church for years and years... will enter heaven. (GUESS WHAT?!) ... All of these attendants had **accepted** their invitation from the groom – and **came** to the wedding. ... But some were shut out.

Matthew 25:5-7

At midnight... the long-awaited announcement was made. The bridegroom had arrived. The time for preparation was over. It was now time for the celebration at the couple's home to begin! ... When they were awakened

by the shout... they needed to light their lamps so that they were prepared to accompany the wedding procession.

They trimmed them by removing the burnt parts of the linen or the torch... so that they would burn clear. Torches like these could not burn indefinitely. Some evidence suggests that they may have burned for only fifteen minutes... before the burnt rags would have to be removed... and new oil-soaked rags would need to be wrapped on the sticks... of which they were made. ... The torches were probably burning as they prepared the home... before they fell asleep... and the attendants let them burn out or snuffed them out with little oil left on them. ... Now they needed to be refreshed... in order to complete the tradition.

Matthew 25:8-9

At first reading you might be bothered at the apparent selfishness of the wise. ... Why didn't they share? ... True Christians are to love others. ... True Christians are to sacrifice. ... True Christians are to share with those in need. -True Enough! ... But they are also to be responsible for... or obedient to... the work the bridegroom has called them to do.

(LISTEN) if Christ has saved you... He did so with specific work (each and every day) for you to do... that you are to be discovering and accomplishing.

Ephesians 2:8-10

for by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

The decision to not share their oil... was not such a dilemma... if we realize (a) obedience to the groom was their first priority, and (b) if they gave away *their* oil... they would... as they said... **all** run out before their task of lighting the way was completed... and thus everyone would be in the dark and in danger. The wedding would be a disaster... and the groom would be shamed... without their torchlight procession.

When Jesus returns to take his people to heaven, we must be ready. Spiritual preparation cannot be bought or borrowed at the last minute. No one can rely on anyone else. Our relationship with God must be our own.

Matthew 25:10

The ominous undertones of this parable are depicted in the closing phrase of this verse: "*and the door was shut.*"

Matthew 25:11-12

Now again... at first reading... just as you might have been bothered by the wise girls' apparent selfishness... here you might be bothered at the groom's apparent harshness. ... Why is the door shut? ... Why does the groom say to those **he asked** to be in *his* wedding that he doesn't even know them?

They are told by the wise to go buy more oil... and off they go. They got the oil... lit up the lamps... and then hurried to the party. ... Sure... they were late... but they could have called it a day. (They could have walked home and gone to bed.) ... But they didn't. They went to the wedding... and they wanted to go in to the party. ... And then... at the shut door... they called

out... “Lord, lord... open-up! It’s us!” ... See how they acknowledge Him (even) as Lord!?

(LISTEN)... *The foolish virgins teach us that too little preparation and too much presumption will result in rejection.*

Once again I will quote Kent Hughes... who is quoting a poem by Alfred Lloyd Tennyson. But before I do... let me just say that something tells me that you probably did not read or study this poem in literature class at public school. ... Tennyson wrote this to capture the tension of these very verses – Matthew 25:10-12. His poem is titled, “Late, Late, So Late!”

*Late, late so late! and dark the night and chill!
Late, late so late! but we can enter still.
“Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.”*

*No light had we; for that we do repent;
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
“Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.”*

*No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!
O let us in, that we may find the light!
“Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.”*

*Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
O let us in, tho’ late, to kiss his feet!
“No, no; too late! ye cannot enter now.”*

As Tennyson notes... these foolish girls are not prepared... and yet they presume that if they go and get prepared... after showing such disregard for the groom’s honor... they “can still enter.” Boy! That is presumption! They presume that if they “do repent ... the bridegroom will relent.” They presume upon his kindness—“Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?”

You see... these five very foolish girls are irresponsibly secure. They think other Christians will surely help them get what is necessary to get in. “If and when the time comes, let’s borrow from the prepared” is their attitude.

Sure... we need church fellowship and more mature believers around us in order to persevere... but when it comes to being faithful to the work God calls each of us to do... here Jesus places individual responsibility before a reliance on others. ... Don’t count on other Christians’ preparedness in the place of your own obedience. You’re on your own before the judgment throne.

AND THEN... these five very foolish girls also think that if they can’t get in on the backs of the saints... gentle Jesus will surely let them in. They might place the blame on him: “*It’s his fault, not mine. He came when I wasn’t ready. He’d better let me in.*” ... Or they assume that the Jesus on Judgment Day... is the Jesus of Christmas Day — little, harmless, non-threatening. ... No! The door will stay closed. Jesus’ point, again, is that to not be ready at the right time means to miss out completely. There is a finality to the shutting of that door. Those outside will not have another chance to be let in.

Matthew 25:13

The church has known for 2,000 years that Jesus is coming again... and yet many believers have become lethargic and drowsy. ... They are no longer excited about the soon-coming of the Lord. As a result... there is little to no desire to wake up every day to discover the good works that Jesus prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

You may be here this morning... and you know that you probably fit more into the category of the foolish young women. ... And indeed... you **do**... ... if you have been treating the promise of Heaven as a kind of insurance policy. Yeah... I believe in Jesus... and I will even come to church when I can. It is good for me to do so... in case all this Jesus stuff is real. Right now... my life happens to be healthy and comfortable. Why change what I know to be familiar and secure... for a life of active obedience to Christ – about which I know little – except that it will challenge me...? ... I am having such a jolly time with my life – what's the hurry about heaven, anyway...?

REMEMBER: *The foolish virgins teach us that too little preparation and too much presumption will result in rejection.*

Your pre-occupation with this world may be a warning of bitter days to come. And they **will** come **unexpectedly**. Foolish bridesmaids will not have enough warning to change. That is the point of this parable. Although Christ's delay may be long... His return in judgment will be sudden and irreversible... So we must be prepared by trusting Him now with a persevering faith that bears fruit.

(You know)... We must love someone very much to stay awake and long for their coming. ... Are you being watchful...? Are you diligently doing all that Christ has asked of you...?

Paul "Bear" Bryant is widely considered to be one of the greatest college football coaches of all time. Bryant's record in 38 years at Maryland, Kentucky, Texas A&M, and Alabama included 323 wins. He also took 29

teams to bowl games and led 15 of his teams to conference championships. In the 1960s and 1970s, no school won more games than Alabama (193-32-5).

During one of Coach Bryant's pregame speeches... Coach Bryant paced in front of his assembled team as the band played for the capacity crowd waiting outside in the stadium. He made eye contact with each player as he spoke the following words:

In this game, there are going to be four or five plays that will determine the outcome of this contest. Four or five plays that will swing the momentum toward us, or away from us. I don't know which plays these will be. You don't know which plays these will be. All you can do is go out there and give all that you have on each and every play. If you are doing that on one of those crucial plays, and you catch your opponent giving less, that play will swing things in our direction. And if we rise to the occasion like that, on those four or five plays, we are gonna leave here today a winner.

Such watchfulness is what Christ asks of us.