

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him for the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came: ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said, ‘Open the door for us!’

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

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

The coming of the bridegroom in the parable stands for the Second Coming of Christ. The ten virgins stand for the followers of Christ. Their oil lamps stand for the Church’s preparedness for the coming of Christ. Verse 13 states the purpose of the parable. **“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”** We have to figure out what it means to keep watch.

The Passing of Time

We had better start by being blunt. It is hard to stay alert for long periods of time. The passing of time wears us down. We get tired, we get distracted, and when nothing happens, we lose interest. That’s true when we are waiting for an important phone call. How much more it is true, when we are waiting for the Second Coming of Christ.

We can see the corrosive power of time among the first Christians. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers: **you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven.** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10) But Paul’s contemporary, the Apostle Peter, was already facing skepticism about the Second Coming: **you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come ... They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”** (2 Peter 3:3-4)

2000 years have passed and still no Second Coming. I ask reverently and in the interests of truth: How is it possible to keep watch for an event that has been delayed 2000 years? You may even wonder, “Why bother?” We can’t ignore either question.

Verse 5 answers with down to earth help. **“The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.”** That is astonishing. The virgins could be watchful and still sleep. Watching for the Lord’s return does not cancel the routines of life. The issue is not keeping your eyes open; it is being prepared. Doing your job and rearing children and getting ready for Christmas and watching television do not make it impossible to watch for the long-delayed Second Coming of Christ. Keeping watch means being prepared for the Second Coming of Christ, even when we are immersed in our daily routines.

A steady stream of Christians in the United States has rejected this understanding. They have taken matters into their own hands. As early as 1822, a Baptist preacher, William Miller, living near the shores of Seneca Lake in Central New York, came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ would come again on October 22, 1844. It was a national phenomenon. Many people sold their worldly goods and prepared to meet the Savior. It is painful to read about the damage that prediction caused, when it did not come to pass.

I have a small collection of predictions of the end of the world. One brochure says in uppercase letters: "IN OCT. 1992 JESUS IS COMING AGAIN. GOD'S JUDGMENT DAY IS NEAR." I have a full page advertisement in the *New York Times* urging people to be ready for the Second Coming on such and such a date. Three years ago, Harold Camping set dates for the Second Coming. The failure of date setting – and the failure rate is 100% - gives people an incentive to mock and ignore the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus' command to keep watch means being prepared for the Second Coming of Christ, even when we are immersed in our daily routines.

The Wise and the Foolish

Back to the parable! Remember: the ten virgins stand for the followers of Christ. The parable divides the ten virgins into two camps. Verses 2-3: **"Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil (any extra oil) with them. The wise, however, took oil (extra oil) in jars along with their lamps.** Being prepared with extra oil made the five wise. Failing to be prepared made the other five foolish.

Now comes the moment of truth in verses 6-9: **"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'**

"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps (the foolish virgins had oil in their lamps, just not enough). "The foolish virgins said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

"No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him for the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

"Later the others also came: 'Sir! Sir!' they said, 'Open the door for us!'

"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'"

Those last four words are among the most chilling words in any language: **'I don't know you.'** It is despair itself to stand before that face, of all faces the one we most want to see, only to hear Him say, **"I don't know you."** That's why we bother with a parable like this. The stakes are very high. You don't want to hear those words. Be prepared for the Second Coming of Christ.

The oil lamps carried by the ten virgins stand for the Church's preparedness for the coming of Christ. Having enough oil to keep the lamps burning was the only way to be prepared for the unpredictable arrival of the bridegroom.

Oil for Our Lamps

So, how do you keep oil in your lamp? What does it mean to be prepared? Nothing in the parable answers that question. Here's what we know so far. Being

prepared enables us to withstand the ravages of time. We can survive our fatigue, distractions, and loss of interest. We can survive futile efforts at setting dates and the inevitable disappointments they bring. Above all, we can be prepared us for the long-delayed Second Coming of Christ, which will almost certainly catch us off guard.

Since nothing in the parable helps us to know what it means to be prepared like that, we have to look outside the parable. But don't look too far. A good rule of Bible study is to look first in the immediate context for answers to difficult problems of interpretation. The Parable of the Ten Virgins lives in a neighborhood of other parables that offer a reasonable and powerful understanding of what the oil stands for.

Verses 14-15: **“Again, it (the kingdom of heaven) is like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability.”** The master allowed them to manage his money as if it were their money, and he expected to see results from they did with his money.

The day of reckoning came. Verse 19: **“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.”** The man who received ten talents of money and the man who received five talents of money had doubled their value. The master praised them, gave them promotions, and they shared his happiness. (Matthew 25:20-23)

The man who received one talent did nothing with it. He buried it. Here's how he justified his inaction: **“Master ... I know that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.”** (Matthew 25:24-25) The master called him **wicked and lazy** and said he could have at least put the money in the bank and earned interest. He had that servant thrown **outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** (Matthew 25:26-30)

God has entrusted each of us with responsibilities in the world and in the Church. He expects results from what we do with those responsibilities. If we do them well, the coming of the bridegroom may catch us sleeping, but he won't catch us unprepared, no matter how tired, distracted, uninterested, or disheartened we have become.

The closing passage of Matthew 25 is one of the great passages in human writing. It offers another reasonable and powerful understanding of how to be prepared for the Second Coming of Christ. Verses 31-33 sets forth how high the stakes are in being prepared. **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”**

Then comes the shocker. **“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”** (Matthew 25:34-36)

Those surprised people couldn't remember doing any act of mercy for the King, and they said so. Verse 40: **“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”** Verse 45 makes it

clear that the opposite is also true. **“He (the King) will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”**

Christ comes to us in the face of the poor, the suffering, the disadvantaged, the underdog, the one who has had the rug pulled out from under him, who has come down in the world and is feeling his loss. Christ is on their side. He is their angel of mercy in deprivation. If that is where Christ is, why would we want to be anywhere else? If we relieve their suffering and loss, the coming of the bridegroom may catch us sleeping, but he won't catch us unprepared, no matter how tired, distracted, uninterested, or disheartened we have become.

Take Away

Embrace your responsibilities in Church and world for the glory of God, and care for the poor and the suffering, and your lamp will always shine, however long the Second Coming of the Bridegroom delays and however suddenly He comes again to rule the world. That's the meaning of the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

That meaning places Christmas efforts at BVBC in a powerful context. The Angel Tree gifts for children whose mom or dad will be in jail at Christmas, the Shoebox Ministry for homeless people, the Gift we hope to make to the Sunday Breakfast Mission and its ministry to the homeless take on a new dimension. The gifts we give are not only to the children and the homeless and those who help them; they are gifts to Christ Himself. When the Sunday Breakfast Mission Homeless Men's Choir stands before us on Friday, December 12, and sing the praises of God, it is as if we see the face of Christ and hear His voice fill this sanctuary.

Some years ago, Dennis and Pat Cannon and Terri and Tom Cline were in Sacramento. They were looking forward to an evening out for dinner. On their way into the restaurant, a homeless couple asking for food stopped them. They had misgivings that many of us have had in similar situations.

Dennis said they decided not to ignore them or refuse them. Instead, they invited them to have dinner with them at the restaurant. The couple accepted. They told the Cannons and Clines their story of having to beg for food. That night, they had more food than they could eat, and the couple carried out food for the next day in a “doggie bag.” Jesus said: **“The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want.”** (Mark 14:7) We now know that when the Cannons bought them dinner, they were buying dinner for Christ.

We have all seen children at play. We have all seen their play come to an end as we might see the world melt with fervent heat and come to an end. What brought about this apocalyptic end to their play was a voice like the voice of an archangel heralding doomsday. It was the voice of their mother calling with authority, “It's time for dinner.” In this example as in hundreds like it an intense but smaller world is brought to an end by being caught up into a much larger world.

When the Church prays, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” it is not a prayer for the demolition of this world. It is a prayer that when Christ comes again, he will catch this world up into the much larger world of the kingdom of heaven. Anticipation of that day is why we bother with the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

We bother also, because the idea that this world is the only world is the real bother. It is a nightmare. It's the cocksure atheist who says, “This world is the only world

there is. So, get used to it and get over it.” The devout Christian says that this world is to the kingdom of heaven what the shadow of a tree is to the tree itself.

The Bridegroom is coming. Are you ready to face Him? Will He find in you faith? Will He know you? Call on Christ to save you. His death made up for all your sins. He has emancipated you from the bondage to evil that distorts human life.

The Bridegroom is coming. Let’s keep plenty of oil on hand. Maybe He will come in our generation. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.