

A few months ago, a relative of mine got married, and on the RSVP there was a dress code asking the men to dress in pants and dress shirts and the women to wear dresses that were knee length and not to wear white or cream. My response was this: “Good for them.” Call me old-fashioned, but if you are given the honor of being invited to participate in the most important, glorious, exciting, day of someone’s life, wouldn’t you want to honor them back in the way that you dress? It’s not like they were requesting \$500 ball gowns or Armani tuxedos, just that if they come to the wedding, that they dress like they are at a wedding. It’s not about the clothes themselves- it’s about honor and respect.

This isn’t unique. Different cultures have different ways of showing honor and respect to the groom and the bride on their wedding day, and in Matthew 25, Jesus’ parable draws on that concept to describe the attitude that believers should have as they wait for Jesus to come back. The point is this: Be ready. What we’ll do is walk through the parable so we can understand exactly what Jesus is saying, and then we’ll go through the two main points that he is making: Don’t be foolish, and Bring your oil.

Honor the Groom: An explanation of the parable.

Like I said, giving special honor to the groom and bride on their wedding day is something common between all different cultures and societies. In our culture, we typically show our honor to the bride and groom by dressing up and giving them a gift. In Jesus’ day, it was a little different. We don’t know a whole lot about 1st Century Jewish marriage traditions, but it would have likely been this: First, the parents of the bride and groom would officially approve of the union. Second, the groom and the bride would swear themselves to each other. At this time, they were considered not quite married, but it was much more binding than “engagement” the way we think about it today. Then, the groom would go off and build a house for them, either his own house or an attachment to his parents house since family tended to stay much closer together. And when it was done, usually months later, the groom would all of a sudden come to take his bride from her parents’ home and take her to their new home and consummate the marriage, and the community would have a feast!

When the groom would go and take his bride from her parents’ home, he wouldn’t go alone. He would have his groomsmen accompany him, and the bride wouldn’t be alone either- she would have ten virgins, unmarried women, accompany her, and the bride and groom would have this group of people walk back to his new home, forming this great, loud, joyful wedding procession or parade- it happened at night, so they would have lamps or torches so that everyone in the community would know that the wedding was happening. Evidently, this part was crucially important. It was a great honor to be asked by the bride and groom to be one of the people to walk with them in their procession to their new home, and in turn, the groomsmen and bridesmaids would want to honor them by making that procession memorable, joyful, and

making sure everyone knows that today is all about this bride and groom. As you can see, just like we would show honor and respect for the bride and groom at their wedding by how we dress and act, they would show honor and respect and love for the bride and groom by making sure that they were ready for when he came to take his bride, making sure that their lamps were ready to burn bright so all could see the procession, and being with them as they went to consummate the wedding, and rejoicing and celebrating with them at the feast.

Jesus then takes this beautiful, exciting picture and says, “the Kingdom of Heaven, that moment when I come back and make the new heavens and earth is kind of like a wedding procession: Therefore, Don’t be foolish!

Let’s hone in on the bridesmaids. Again, it would have been a great honor to be asked to do this, but there’s something off about five of them. In the ancient world, if you wanted light, you would have a lamp with a wick in oil, and the fire would burn the oil and if you had oil, you could have fire, but you’d need to pour oil in to keep the lamp going. This is common sense. Which is why I don’t love the words “wise” and “foolish” as translations of the Greek. The word for “wise” doesn’t mean wisdom in the sense of being exceptionally brilliant, but having common sense. You don’t need a PhD to know lamps need oil. And the word for “foolish” isn’t so polite- a better translation would be “stupid-” our english word “moron” comes from the Greek word used by Jesus. These bridesmaids are, according to Jesus, morons. And they are moronic enough to get all ready for the wedding procession, bring their lamps, but no extra oil! That would be like driving to Colorado without gas money. And then the bridegroom comes, and they aren’t ready- their lamps are going to go out and they try to mooch off the other bridesmaids, but there isn’t enough- if the sensible bridesmaids share their oil, then none of the lamps will burn and the procession will be ruined! So they go to the market to get oil and right as they are leaving, the bridegroom comes and by the time they get back- they’ve missed the whole procession- and they arrive at the feast and say, “Lord, Lord, let us in!” And the response given by Christ strikes dread and terror within my heart: “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.”

We have to be careful with Jesus’ parables and making each element of the parable “mean” something- but one of the things he is clearly teaching here is this: Judgment day will be like when a groom takes his bride, completely unexpected, and you must be ready, and if you are not, you will not be included in the feast, in fact, this parable shows that it is entirely possible to look like a bridesmaid, act like a bridesmaid, and be rejected from the feast and not even know the groom. It is very possible to look like a christian, act like a christian, and not go to heaven or even truly know Jesus- in fact, we know from Scripture that it’s not just possible, but reality. There are people who are outwardly Christians, and may even think they’re Christians and say “Lord, Lord, let me in,” and Jesus will say to them on the last day, “I don’t know you.” And these words taste like battery acid in my mouth, but as your pastor I must say this. There very well may be people that are official members of this very congregation that will go to hell forever. I can’t know, I can’t read your hearts. From what I can tell, everyone that I’ve gotten to

meet here seems to me to be a devout, loving, Christian who loves Jesus with a repentant, humble heart, but I also know that I can't see hearts, and it's possible that someone might be putting on a show and if you are one of those people, I beg you to fully think about this truth- by the time you realize how foolish you've been, it will be too late. Don't wait. Don't harden your heart. Don't put on a show. Now is the time to repent, not soon, not later, now. Jesus could come any time, and we need to be ready. How can we be ready?

We need oil.

What does that mean? Throughout the past 2000 years, this parable of Jesus has captured the imaginations of countless Christians, all of whom ask this question: We want to be ready! We want to come to the feast! We need oil- what does Jesus mean when he talks about having oil in our lamps? What does it mean to be truly ready for Jesus to come back? I found a quote about this parable from a man called Seraphim of Sarov, a highly respected Greek Orthodox theologian from the 1700's, and I think it may be helpful:

"Some say that the lack of oil in the lamps of the foolish virgins means a lack of good deeds in their lifetime. Such an interpretation is not quite correct. Why should they be lacking in good deeds, if they are called virgins, even though foolish ones?..I think that what they were lacking was the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God. These virgins practiced the virtues, but in their spiritual ignorance they supposed that the Christian life consisted merely in doing good works. By doing a good deed they thought they were doing the work of God, but they cared little whether they acquired the grace of God's Spirit."

What makes someone unready often isn't their sin, their lack of good works, or their guilt, but their pride, their complacency because they are "good enough." What makes you ready, therefore, isn't anything you offer,, but faith in the one who saves you by grace. You see, Jesus never says that he wants you to be afraid of his return, he wants you to be ready. And readiness in the heart of a Christian isn't characterized by fear, but of joy. We just sang about this: "Those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bear, cause of endless exultation to his ransomed worshipers." How can you be ready and joyful for the coming of the one who will bring judgment and wrath upon the earth? Because the hands that hold the sword of justice also have holes, and so do his feet, and his side has a wound, because the punishment and exclusion from heaven that you deserve, he suffered for you. There's nothing left for you to suffer. Jesus came to earth and instead of bringing punishment and wrath, he absorbed and suffered punishment and wrath so that when he comes again to bring punishment and wrath, those who trust in him may see those dear tokens, the holes in his hands and rejoice. Because of the Cross, Christ's return is something we look forward to, like bridesmaids waiting for the groom to lead them to the feast. Jesus doesn't want you to be afraid, but he also doesn't want you to be complacent, self-righteous, or distracted. He wants you to be ready.

And if you ever feel like you aren't ready, like you don't have oil you need to be ready, don't look to yourself and see if you've done enough or believe hard enough. Look to the Cross and the empty tomb and see that it was all for you, that you belong to Christ. That is where your oil comes from. So, my friends, please don't be afraid. You are ready. Because of what Christ has done, you have plenty of oil so you can say with joy, "Come Lord Jesus, Amen."