

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Brian Wood**  
**“Putting Oil in Our Lamps”**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
**November 12, 2017**  
**11:00 a.m.**

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In my family, we are in a season of weddings. I have seven first cousins between the age of 22 and 30. Three have gotten married during my time at Davidson, and I would not be shocked if another one gets engaged before I graduate in May. It’s an exciting time, as weddings serve as a wonderful chance for our family to come together in celebration of the union of two people that have committed their lives to one another. For my family, the size of these celebrations has varied widely. One cousin got married in an intimate ceremony in a small chapel with just family members present. Another one, who happened to be a Davidson graduate, invited over 200 guests to the ceremony at her parents’ farm. As rain began to fall on the gathering, we were all forced to seek refuge beneath enormous tents that had been rented just in case it rained, which, of course, it did. After the ceremony, we hit the dance floor in my uncle’s barn and danced the night away in celebration of the newly married couple.

In today’s scripture passage, Jesus also talks about weddings as he speaks of the kingdom of heaven in terms of a groom meeting expectant bridesmaids before a wedding banquet. To better understand this passage, it helps to know a bit about Jewish wedding customs during the time of Jesus. Typically, the wedding party would gather at the house of the bride’s parents and wait for the groom to arrive, often in the evening.<sup>1</sup> The entire party would then process, often with lit lamps, to the home of the groom’s parents, where the wedding ceremony would take place, followed by an extended feast that would last several days as the families celebrated the new union. You may recall that Jesus’ first miracle took place at a wedding celebration as he turned water into wine after the hosts ran out of wine. In today’s passage, we are introduced to ten bridesmaids, who likely were awaiting the groom at the home of the bride’s parents. All of the bridesmaids bring lamps, likely to use in the procession. 5 of the bridesmaids, who are said to be wise, bring extra oil, just in case the groom is late and they burn through the oil that is already in their lamps. The other five, however, don’t bring extra oil, which leads Jesus to call them foolish. All ten of the bridesmaids are prepared with their lamps to process to the ceremony and banquet once the groom arrives, but he’s late. So the bridesmaids are left to wait into the night unsure of when the groom will arrive.

Not knowing how long someone will be is something that is tough for us to comprehend in today’s world. When I go to visit someone, I typically send them a text right before I leave informing them of my estimated time of arrival. If I am going to be late or if I get held up, I can give them a call, so they are not stuck waiting for me and worrying. Thus this idea of waiting for someone for an undetermined amount of time is for many strange. But that’s not true for everyone today. Veterans day was this week—to the veterans in attendance I offer my sincere thanks for the sacrifices you have made for this country. Many of you likely know what it’s like to wait for an unspecified amount of time for something to happen. My uncle is in the army and recently returned from a tour of duty in Iraq. He works in military intelligence so he is used to waiting for an unknown amount of time for the arrival time of an intercepted message or a tip. He always has to be ready just in case, which is challenging and exhausting.

For the bridesmaids, the delay of the groom into the night proves to be too much for them, as they all grow drowsy and fall asleep—both the foolish and the wise. Finally, at midnight, there is a shout as the groom is spotted. The bridesmaids are told to come out and meet him—the time has finally come and they can walk to the party that they have been waiting for. They need their lamps to go out and meet him, though, as darkness has crept over the land by midnight, so they rise and trim their lamps and prepare to go out. But there’s a

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 137.

problem. The foolish bridesmaids realize that their lamps are going out because they do not have enough oil. They ask the other bridesmaids—the wise ones—for some of the extra oil that they brought. But the wise bridesmaids tell the foolish ones that there is not enough oil for them to share. Instead they recommend that the foolish bridesmaids go out and buy some oil. Now I don't know about you, but I would have questions about going out, at night, with a dysfunctional lamp to buy oil. Some biblical scholars have pointed out the ridiculousness of this idea and suggested it was meant by Jesus to be humorous.<sup>2</sup> What oil vendor is open at midnight. There's no twenty-four hour Walmart in first century Palestine, so the listeners probably laughed and pitied the foolish bridesmaids sent out to find oil in the dark. Meanwhile, Jesus says "those who were ready went with the bridegroom into the banquet." Once they reach the banquet, they shut the door and begin the celebration. Later, the foolish bridesmaids arrive at the banquet, though we don't know if they found any oil. I like to think they did given they found their way to the banquet in the dark, but that's really beside the point.

Now Jesus here has probably set us up expecting for the groom to welcome the bridesmaids despite their foolishness and show them mercy. But, as Jesus so often does in his lessons, he defies expectation. Even as the bridesmaids call "Lord, Lord open to us." The groom replies "I do not know you" and presumably does not allow them to enter. Thus the bridesmaids are left out of the party. Jesus then closes the story by warning his disciples to "keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

I'll admit, every time I read this passage I am taken aback. The mercy we were expecting is not shown. The foolish bridesmaids—whose only mistake was not planning for an unforeseen delay—are left out of the party. I honestly relate to these foolish bridesmaids a bit, don't you? I also often fail to prepare for the unforeseen as I run around doing all the different things that I have to every day. So what are we to glean from this passage. Before attempting to answer that, let us take a step back and look at the broader circumstance in which Jesus offers this message. I think it helps when trying to understand it.

The story of the ten bridesmaids comes in a series of stories Jesus tells to his disciples while on the Mount of Olives. The stories are prompted, by the disciples asking "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age." Jesus then works through a series of lessons in which he foretells the coming persecution of the disciples, the rise of false prophets, the second coming and the end of the earth. This discourse is often called the eschatological discourse. Eschatological comes from the greek word eschatos, meaning the last or the end. So this is a discourse having to do with the end. The Gospel of Matthew is preoccupied with the end of the world and final judgement more than the other three gospels. It uses the phrase "gnashing of teeth" six times, while no other gospel uses it more than once. Indeed, this passage appears only in the gospel of Matthew, as do many of the stories Jesus tells in the eschatological discourse.

A major theme of several of these stories is the second coming, with some referring to the return of a master or in this case, a groom—usually understood to represent Jesus. Jesus says in the chapter before this morning's scripture that no one knows the time of the second coming except the Father. Thus, He implores his disciples to be ever watchful and prepared for His return in this and several other stories. Now, when Matthew was written in the first century after Jesus' death, many Christians likely thought the second coming was not that far away, but 2,000 years later many Christians no longer preoccupy themselves with the second coming. We've grown accustomed to the Master's absence and thus don't focus on waiting for his return every day. While I think this progression is natural, I wonder what can be gained from living a life in which we are always prepared for the end.

What does it mean, to be ready or to bring extra oil or stay awake? Theologians differ on this point. Some believe oil represents faith. The wise bridesmaids have greater faith that precedes the arrival of the groom. But this doesn't fully convince me. The oil here cannot be shared, but last I checked faith can be and we are called to share our faith. Indeed, it's often in the darkest times that we need others to share their faith with us when our own seems at risk of going out. Other theologians suggest the oil represents good works. They often point to the story before this in which Jesus frames the second coming in terms of a faithful and an unfaithful slave. While the faithful slave works diligently while the master is away, the unfaithful one gets drunk and beats other slaves. When the master returns unexpectedly, he finds the faithful slave at work and puts him in charge

of all of his possessions. But the unfaithful slave is rebuked and condemned to the place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Based on this, it seems clear that Jesus calls us to perform acts of grace and mercy even in his absence.

But that still does not quite work with today's passage. At the time of the groom's arrival, everyone is sleeping, not just the foolish bridesmaids. Further, they go out into the night in search of oil, suggesting it is something that can be acquired, rather than performed. I think the most compelling way of interpreting today's passage is to take it as a call for preparedness and focus on our faiths. I know for many of us, periods of doubt and business can get in the way of our relationship with God. It is easy to fall into the trap of sleeping on our faith, as we become preoccupied with other things like work, or sports, or even hypothetically your history thesis during your senior year at Davidson. But here Jesus calls us to be always prepared, always watchful, always in relationship with Him. What would happen if we took every day and every interaction as if it were the last one before Jesus' return. Amidst the business of life, this can be challenging, but it can be done. It requires a singular focus on God. I've seen this singular focus on God down the road in Mooresville recently. You see, I spent my Thursday nights from 7 to 11 p.m. at Serenity house, which is a hospice affiliated comfort care home. I provide care for patients referred to the hosue by hospice. Recently, I got to know a patient whose faith was profound. As she neared death, God became her singular focus and we often talked about her favorite passages and my own faith journey. She even helped me craft my sermon that I delivered on last year's Ukrik Sunday. As the end of her life drew near, she found peace and exuded a love that I believe only can come from a relationship with God.

Now for those of us without a clear sense of when the end will come, I don't suggest that every single moment of our lives will have God as our central focus. I'm realistic. But I think having Him at the forefront of our minds and hearts as much as we can is beneficial. If we embrace every day and interaction with the love of Christ in our hearts, with faiths that are active and engaged, then I pray we will be awake with lamps full of oil. A favorite song of mine growing up that many of you are aware likely familiar with talks about lamps that are full of oil. Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning. I hadn't made the connection between that song and this scripture until this week, but let me give you a quick refresher on how the song goes. Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Give me oil in my lamp I pray. Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning. Keep me burning until the break of day.

Unfortunately, the song does not provide clear instructions on how to get this oil. It suggests we can ask for it, according to the song, but today's scripture suggests we also can go and get the oil needed for our lamps. We can dedicate ourselves to God and act with him and the end in mind.

Now, this is not to suggest that Jesus calls us only to live faiths that force us to turn inward. I think it's fitting that today's passage comes right after the story of the faithful servant, which calls us to do works of mercy and grace as well. It's when our focus on God pushes us to perform these acts, that I think we are most prepared.

The book of Isaiah also offers a passage that speaks of our faith in terms of lights and connects to our actions, which I think makes clear this point and does so beautifully. Here these words from Isaiah 58.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

<sup>8</sup> Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness<sup>[a]</sup> will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup>Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

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and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

So by performing acts of mercy and love in the name of God and in worship to him, we can find a light. We all will have midnights. Moments where darkness surrounds and we need light to be able to go on. But if we cultivate a life filled with light – a light that rises in the darkness and turns the night into noonday—then surely, we know that the darkness shall not overcome us and we will be prepared. And that is worthy of a celebration feast.