

Follow: Learning from Matthew to Live Like Jesus

Faith UMC Lent Bible Study, 2025

Week 5

Matthew 25:1-13

¹Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

⁸The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." ⁹But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." ¹²But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Conviction to Change

The only wedding guest who didn't know the groom would be late was me, and I was the officiant.

The wedding was supposed to start, or so I thought, at 2:00pm, so I arrived at the venue at 1:15. But when I realized the only other human in the building was the caterer, I knew something was off. I checked the wedding invitation. I was at the correct venue at the right time, but no groom. There was no bride, either, or bridal party, family, or guests. My saving grace was the caterer: he passed me snacks while I stood at the altar, scrolling on my phone and texting my wife every ten minutes that I'd be running late.

By 3:00, the extended family had arrived. By 3:30, the parents and the DJ had arrived. By 4:00, the venue started filling up with guests. By 4:15, the bridal party had arrived and told me the groom and his bride were on their way, but there was a problem: the groom had left the wedding ring at home! The car containing the two most important people in this wedding, the bride and the groom, had turned around and was driving in the opposite direction. I texted my wife and told her to plan on having dinner without me.

At 4:45, the bride and groom arrived. At 5:00, we started the wedding- a full *three hours late*.

Or was it late? The only person in the room who thought the wedding was starting late was me, the lone white person at the wedding and the only person raised to think weddings should start at the advertised time. Every other person at the wedding was a member of the Congolese diaspora. They were either born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or a surrounding country and, having fled the long civil war in Congo, immigrated to America as refugees, or they were children of refugees, born as naturalized citizens in America. Both the bride and groom were born in African refugee camps, and I was their pastor. My church in Houston had a thriving ministry with Congolese refugees, which meant I should have seen this coming. I should have known that my assumption that weddings start at the advertised time was held by literally no one else at this wedding.

In the culture I was learning to serve, “on time” means whatever time the groom happens to show up. The time printed on the wedding invitation is the time *you start getting ready* for the wedding, not the time when the wedding service begins. The wedding begins whenever the groom chooses to arrive, and since the groom and the groom’s family is paying for the wedding, the groom can show up whenever he wants. Everyone who shows up to the wedding before the groom is early. That means the groom in this story wasn’t late. The groom was on time. I was the guest who didn’t plan on the groom defining what “on time” means. In other words, I was the punchline of the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

The culture Jesus called home, the culture of first century, small town Galilee, was like the home culture of my African refugee church members. In this culture, no groom shows up to his own wedding at the time advertised. The time advertised is the time for getting ready, not the time for showing up.

The grooms of ancient Galilee would have worked for years as teenagers to save enough money for the wedding. According to the norms of arranged marriage, the groom couldn’t marry his betrothed until he had enough savings to pay for the wedding day and for building a house, a new house for his new family. For the groom, the wedding day was a hard-earned victory after years of toil. It was a night for celebrating his accomplishment with his family and friends. Plus, the groom was paying for the big day out of his own pocket, so let’s face it, he can show up whenever he wants.

What makes the five wise bridesmaids *wise* was the expectation that the groom would be delayed, which would have been the case at every wedding in this culture. What makes the five foolish bridesmaids *foolish* was the assumption that the groom would arrive at the time on the invitation. But no- the time of the invitation was for getting ready. Ironically, the five foolish bridesmaids showed up at the time for getting ready but, because their lamps had run out of oil, they were *not ready* when the groom showed up!

The groom in the parable represents Jesus. Jesus will return, and there's no predicting when he'll show up. Like a groom coming to claim his bride, Jesus will arrive at whatever time suits him. It's totally up to him. He's paying for the wedding with his own flesh and blood, so let's face it, he can show up whenever he wants.

That means it's our job to be like the five wise bridesmaids. We should expect Jesus to be delayed. Rather than fret over his delayed return, we should *expect* Jesus to take his time.

We should also be ready. We need to be ready for Jesus to return, and since Jesus could show up at any moment, that means we need to be ready right now. *Now* is the advertised time on the wedding invitation. *Now* is the time for getting ready. The groom could show up at any moment in the future, between ten seconds and ten thousand years from now. Now may not be the time when the wedding actually begins, or when Jesus makes his grand entrance, but now is the time for getting ready for his grand entrance. Are you ready?

What does it mean for us to be ready for Jesus to return? It means we need to change. We need to change our lives so that we're reflecting Christ with our lives. We change now just in case Jesus shows up a few moments from now. We change so we can be ready.

Jesus has already used a word in Matthew for this kind of change. It's repentance. Repentance, *metanoia* in Greek, means a change of thinking that leads to a change of living. *Metanoia* specifically refers to a change of thinking after you learn new information. You're confronted with a fresh perspective on a subject, or new data, or compelling logic, or the stories or experiences of others, and you do one of the bravest things a person can do: you change your mind. Your change of mind leads to a change in the way you live. That's repentance.

One of the markers of a life that follow Jesus is the Conviction to Change. Especially during the season of Lent leading up to Easter, followers of Jesus take seriously our responsibility to change toward Christ. The time to repent is now, for the sake of being ready when the groom decides to make his grand entrance, which could be while you're reading these words- right *now*.

Change Now!

Jesus makes his grand entrance into Jerusalem at the beginning of Matthew 21. Jesus and the disciples are making the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Jesus rides into town on a donkey, fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah 9:9.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Jesus is the Messiah, God's chosen king. Jesus is the rightful heir of King David, his ancestor. This makes make Jerusalem, also known as the City of David, Jesus' birthright. Therefore, his entry into Jerusalem is a homecoming. Jesus was born for this moment, when he claims the city, the throne, and the authority over the city he has stood to inherit since he was born in Bethlehem.

Except the scene is off. The homecoming parade should be grander than this! For one, the king should enter the city in the best vehicle money can buy, and in this culture, the most luxurious vehicle was a warhorse. When the Roman Caesars and generals rode home from war after victory, they entered the city in a spectacular parade while mounted on a mighty stallion, sitting high and proud on a vehicle no one else in the crowd could afford.

But Zechariah had predicted how different God's chosen king would be. The Messiah will be humble, not proud, a Servant King whose humility will be evident by his choice of steed. The Messiah doesn't want a horse, or a limousine, or a tank, or a jet, or a sports car. The Messiah rides in on a borrowed donkey like the grand marshal in a county fair: he sits on the back of a second-hand junk car right behind a tractor, waving to his followers who, like him, have humble beginnings and humble futures.

The crowd on the parade line shouts, "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matthew 21:9). Hosanna means "Save us now!" Imagine hosanna being chanted by an angry mob gathered at the steps of a dictator's house, a dictator they've been waiting to overthrow for generations, and now's their chance. "Save us now!" means Jesus is the hope of the oppressed of the earth who need salvation from real and tangible evil pushed on them from the top-down, in addition to salvation from the universal threats of sin and death. The oppressed put their hopes in a hero who rides into town on a junk car.

In Matthew's version of Holy Week, the very first thing Jesus does once he enters the city of Jerusalem is cleanse the Temple. "Cleansing" is a polite word for what Jesus does. A more accurate description would be "cleaning house" in the way a new CEO fires everyone who is holding the company back. Jesus is the new CEO of Jerusalem, and he cleans house. He "drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. (Matthew 21:12).

Why does Jesus clean house? Because he sees how far religion has fallen from God's original purpose for religion. What religion is *for* in the first place is an intimate relationship

with God. Religion provides the practices, structures, and community for strengthening our relationship with God. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had no need for religion because God was in their presence at all times. Their relationship with God didn't need strengthening; it couldn't get any closer. It's only now, on the other side of Eden where a relationship with God takes effort because God's presence isn't self-evident, that human beings have a need for religion. Jesus is furious because what Jesus sees in the Temple isn't a community of good-hearted people trying to practice a relationship with God. Far from it, Jesus sees a big business putting up unnecessary and expensive barriers to a relationship with God. The Temple, which represents all institutional religion at its worst, has become the opposite of its true purpose: instead of helping people grow closer to God, the Temple is pushing people away from a relationship with God.

The Temple was doing this through the practice of money-changing and the selling of animal sacrifices. Normal currency wasn't allowed in the Temple because Roman coins bore the image of the emperor, who claimed to be a god. Because the Ten Commandments forbid the worship of graven images (Exodus 20:4-6), Roman coins were not allowed on Temple property. However, there were savvy entrepreneurs in Jerusalem who saw a business opportunity. They would change Roman currency into special Temple currency and, like the money exchangers in airports, they would charge a small fee for each exchange.

The Temple forced people to buy and sell in the Temple because of the use of animal sacrifices. The Torah in the Old Testament spells out which animal sacrifices are commanded at various points in a person's life. The problem was, most Jews lived far from the Temple and couldn't bring living animals with them to Jerusalem for the sacrifice. Here again was a business opportunity. People would buy up animals in the Temple, then turn around and sell them to pilgrims needing the exact same animal. The detail about doves in Matthew shows us that the people who suffered the most from this practice were the poor. If a person couldn't afford a more expensive animal like a bull or a goat, the Torah allowed the sacrifice of a dove, a much cheaper animal (see Leviticus 12:6-8).

Jesus is angry because the Temple – which remember, represents *all* institutional religion, so we shouldn't be too hard on Judaism – has corrupted the very purpose of religion, fencing off people from a relationship with God because the religious-industrial complex has put a price tag on worshipping God. Worship required paying for an animal, and the changing of money required paying the surcharge on currency exchange. Jesus turns over the tables of the money-tables and chases the animal-sellers out of the building. He wants to see change in God's house, and he wants to see it now!

Jesus wants to see a complete change in the way Israel approached religion, and I believe he wants to see the same change in the religion of our day, too. Rather than creating *barriers*

between people and God, religion is for creating *bridges* between people and God. There are too many barriers in religion, and far too few bridges. We need to be bridge-builders, which means we need to change, and change *now*. The underlying reason why Jesus disturbs the peace in the Temple is because Jesus wants to induce a sense of urgency in the organized religion of Israel, urgency to reform itself totally and immediately.

The first step in change is a sense of urgency. No one changes until they feel the urgency. I use this phrase often in my ministry: no one changed because they saw the light; they changed because they felt the heat. We need to feel the heat, a sense of change-must-happen-now-or-else, or a person won't change at all. This is the urgency of an alcoholic hitting rock bottom, or a spouse after their partner finds out about the affair, a small business owner when he sees it's impossible to make payroll this month without making serious changes, a patient when the doctor says, "If you keep living this way, you'll never meet your grandchildren."

At the heart of the gospel is the belief in God's ability to change people. But that begs the question, do you believe you *can* change? We underestimate our capacity to change. We tend to think we stay the same day after day, and it's hard to believe that other people, especially hard-to-love people, will ever change. But ask yourself, are you the same person you were ten years ago? Do you have the same friends as ten years ago? Do you like the same foods you enjoyed ten years ago? Wear the same clothes? Use the same technology? Of course not. Why would ten years from now, or ten days from now, be any different? Repentance begins with believing in God's ability to change you: a change of thinking, leading to a change of heart, leading to a change of life.

In what ways do you need to make a change today? It could be a reduction in your hurry- you're so overcommitted, there's no margin in your life, and something has to give. It could be a change of diet or exercise. It could be an increase in the amount of time you give to service and compassion for others. Or a change in your tone of voice and choice of words when you're speaking to others, especially your loved ones- you could be kinder and softer, speaking less and listening more. Or the change could be a spiritual discipline: reading your Bible more, praying daily more, coming together with friends in community more, attending worship more, giving generously to God's causes, including the church, more.

Whatever the change, it probably won't happen unless you and I induce a sense of urgency in ourselves. We could let time slip away and push off making the change. It's too easy to postpone indefinitely the changes we need to make so we can live abundantly and love generously, as God intended. We shouldn't assume there will come a day when we see the light. We need to induce the heat now.

Jesus often uses a rhetorical tool called *hyperbole*, where you make a case by exaggerating a point. The case Jesus is trying to make is: you religious leaders need to change! The point Jesus exaggerates is: if you don't change, God will smite you. The exaggerations of Jesus are spicy. He talks of judgment, hellfire, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. We must remember Jesus was a master communicator and made good use of hyperbole. He uses images of judgement in the afterlife as hyperbolic metaphors intended to convey urgency, to turn up the heat on people who absolutely *must* change.

Jesus will turn up the temperature in Jerusalem for five days, from Sunday to Thursday of Holy Week. Jesus enters Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover. He spends the daytime hours of Monday through Thursday preaching in the Temple. He spends the night in a suburb of Jerusalem called Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper (Matthew 21:17, 26:6). Jesus' preaching in the Temple is hot, five-alarm pepper hot. His audience is the "chief priests and the elders of the people" (Matthew 21:23). These are the core leaders of Israel, people who do not take kindly to troublemakers getting spicy with them. But Jesus gets spicy nonetheless. He speaks truth to the religious powers of his day, the people who have it in their power to kill him, and he calls them to change their ways before it's too late and their corruption becomes their undoing.

In Matthew 21:28-32, Jesus tells the Parable of Two Sons. He compares a son who says he will *not* put in a day's work but nonetheless shows up for work anyway, with a son who says he *will* put in a day's work but stays on the couch. The first son represents the tax-collectors and prostitutes, the unholy bad people imaginable: these will enter the Kingdom of God first, because they've heard God's message of compassion from Jesus, and now they've repented and followed him. The second son represents the leaders of Israel: they said they would work for God, but ultimately, they didn't do it. Instead, they created a religious system that pushed people away from God. God has given the leadership of Israel many chances to change their mind and repent, ending in the last prophet who died at their hands, John the Baptist. Jesus takes his place in a long line of prophets who call the center of religious leadership to *change*.

Then, Jesus tells the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matthew 21:33-41), where Jesus compares Israel to a vineyard and the leadership of Israel to tenants whom the landowner, God, has put in charge of the vineyard. The landowner sends slaves, representing the prophets, to collect the harvest, but the tenants kill the slaves. Finally, the landowner sends his very own son to collect the harvest, and the tenants slaughter the son. The landowner will put the tenants to a miserable death. I imagine Jesus looking the chief priests and Pharisees in the eye and saying, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. (Matthew 21:43). The religious leaders will not be in charge in the Kingdom of God; their time of power is ending. Leadership will be given to better qualified people, those who follow Jesus, and produce fruit of the Kingdom in the way they live.

Is it too late for the chief priests, elders, and leadership of Israel to change? Not necessarily. They could always change, and that's the point. Jesus is inducing a sense of urgency so they make the choice to change while they still have time.

Change With Eulogy in Mind

Jesus also clarifies what sort of life the religious leadership of Jerusalem are to change toward. They must change toward Kingdom values, a way of living on earth as it will be in heaven.

We, too, must change toward Kingdom values. We learned in Week 4 that the Kingdom of God is Jesus' vision for the world as it should be. The Kingdom is God's software update for all of creation. We find ourselves in the middle of a long progress bar of a final software update, but the wait will be worth it, for when the software update is complete, the world will be as it should be and the only way humans will interact with one another and with God will be love.

We are to live now *as if* the Kingdom of God has fully arrived. That means we must change toward a Kingdom way of living now- like right now, while you're reading this lesson. What does it look like to change toward the Kingdom? It's a change of values.

About once a year, I remind my congregation of a brilliant insight from the author David Brooks. He argues for a commitment to eulogy values rather than resumé values. Resumé values are good for boosting your resume, climbing the ladder, and winning the approval of others. But eulogy values are good for improving your obituary, going down the social ladder so you can serve people where they are, and making a loving impact in the lives of your family, friends, and community. Resume values are worldly and ambitious. Eulogy values are humble and brave. Resume values want to conquer the world. Eulogy virtues want to serve the world. Resume values say, "The more I compete, the greater the reward. The more victories and possessions I have, the safer I will be." Eulogy virtues say, "The more I lose myself, the more I find myself. The more I give myself away in kindness, compassion, and courage, the better I know who I am."¹

Kingdom values are for boosting our obituaries. What if we cared more about what people say about us at our funerals than what people are saying about us on social media? What if we move beyond making a name for ourselves to taking seriously how you want others to remember you in the future? Jesus calls us toward a eulogy-value way of life, for that is living on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus provides three Kingdom values in Matthew 22. The first is hospitality.

¹ David Brooks. https://www.ted.com/talks/david_brooks_should_you_live_for_your_resume_or_your_eulogy

In the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-13), Jesus compares the Kingdom to a king who throws a lavish wedding party for his son. The king had sent invitations to the usual suspects, the VIP's who would expect an invitation to a fancy party like this, but the guests decline the invitation, some going so far as to kill the messengers whom the king had sent. The king represents God, the messengers represent the prophets, and the guests represent the leadership of Israel who don't actually want a relationship with God; they want a comfortable life for themselves on their own terms, with no one challenging them to live up to expectations.

But look what happens next. The king says to his slaves, the messengers – and here the parable shifts to talking about us, the followers of Jesus – “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” (Matthew 22:9). The king switches tactics. Instead of VIP treatment for a select few, the king wants to show hospitality to all, to *everyone you find*. The slaves do exactly that. They “gathered all whom they found, both good and bad” (Matthew 22:10).

Jesus is challenging us to change our treatment of the people who go in and out of our lives, the guests God sends our way. We're to drop the VIP treatment where we show warmth and respect to the few - the pretty, the popular, and the powerful. Rather, we're to pick up hospitality to everyone we find, both good and bad, and welcome them into our lives *and our churches* with equal VIP treatment. As the king switches gears and treats everyone off the streets as VIP's, so must we make the switch. Everyone we find is a VIP- the homeless, the lonely, the ragged and worn, the rich and fancy, the sick, the prisoner, the old and the young.

In Matthew 22:15-22, the Pharisees try to trick Jesus into saying publicly that Jews don't have to pay their taxes to Rome, in an attempt to drown Jesus in legal trouble with the government. But Jesus doesn't fall for it. He says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21). In other words, the people of God should pay their taxes because the government already owns our tax dollars; we're simply returning what doesn't belong to us. But remember, everything ultimately belongs to God, so the people of God must return our entire lives back to God.

The Kingdom value here is integrity. Followers of Jesus uphold integrity as people who owe ultimate allegiance to God. Everything belongs to God, and included in “everything” is the very life we live. Therefore, we don't compromise our integrity by giving our ultimate allegiance to the other people and powers in our lives. We work for God. Period. You may have a boss at work, and your boss may have multiple boss above him or her. At the very top of the chain, where the corporate ladder can't climb any higher, is the big boss. Ultimately, you work for the big boss. God is the Big Boss. Followers of Jesus work for the Big Boss and no other person,

power, party, or partisan group on earth. This is the life of integrity, a life in the way of the Kingdom where there's only one King. Period.

The Pharisees challenge Jesus again in Matthew 22:34-40. They ask him which is the greatest commandment in the Scriptures. In modern speech, this is the equivalent of asking Jesus what the meaning of life is. Why are we here? Jesus answers by combining two passages from the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. He borrows from Deuteronomy 6:4, a passage that says, "Love God," and Leviticus 19:18, a verse that says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The result is the Greatest Commandment of all, the very meaning of life:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus is saying, loving God and loving neighbor are an accurate summary of what God is trying to communicate in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. If we could all love God and love neighbor, and that was all we did, then we would have fulfilled everything God expects from us.

Love God and love your neighbor as yourself- that's the first Kingdom value of all. Love God and love people: chase this if you want a good eulogy. At your funeral, no one will talk about the amount of money you made, the number of social media followers you had, the brand of clothing you wore, or the kind of vehicle you drove. At your funeral, if someone talks about your rewards, work accomplishments, or victories at other people's expense, then the guests will be bored and the family will be disappointed, for the measures of success of this world are *not* the measures of success in the Kingdom of God. The primary measure of a life well-lived in the Kingdom of God is love. Love God and love neighbor yourself: *change toward this* if you want a good funeral when you're gone.

Change with Fruit in Mind

In Matthew 23, Jesus turns up the spice to the highest heat. He preaches seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees. In Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation of the Bible, "woe" is translated "You're hopeless!" That sums up the content and tone of these woes. Jesus looks the scribes and Pharisees in the eye and says, "You're hopeless." He calls them "hypocrites." *The Message* translates hypocrite as "fraud." Imagine a preacher staring you down and shouting, "You're hopeless! Fraud!"

It sounds harsh of Jesus to call someone hopeless and a fraud, but let's remember the point earlier about hyperbole. Jesus used hyperbole, which is making a case by arguing the

exaggeration, to convict people to change. Jesus isn't communicating a theological truth; he's convicting hard-hearted leaders to change their ways. From God's perspective, no one is hopeless, but it sure is an effective behavior medication tool to call someone hopeless. The impact, if the person will actually hear the feedback, has a humbling effect. "If I'm hopeless, then I've hit rock bottom. I need to shape up." Calling someone a hypocrite or fraud sounds cruel; but Jesus isn't being cruel, he's being honest. The scribes and Pharisees *are* hypocrites, just like many people in leadership over others, especially in religious institutions, *are* hypocrites. Jesus simply has the guts to call a thing, a thing.

Hypocrisy means saying one thing but doing another. A person is a hypocrite when their words don't match their lifestyle. Matthew uses the Greek word *hupokrités*, meaning actor on a stage, someone who is pretending to be someone they're not. In truth, the scribes and Pharisees don't want an intimate relationship with God where they live in a way that calls others to an intimate relationship with God, but they *pretend* to be that kind of person, like an actor playing a roll, so that others will see them as good and holy people, the "right kind" of person. A hypocrite, then, is a pretender of a part. The scribes and Pharisees pretend to look religious, when really and truly, they just want to look good.

Jesus gives several vivid images of hypocrisy, and I invite us to see ourselves in these images, for we're all guilty of hypocrisy at some point. Let's look at three of these images.

Jesus says the scribes and Pharisees "do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long" (Matthew 23:6). A phylactery is a leather box containing tiny scrolls of verses from the Old Testament, attached to the foreheads and arms of Jewish men with leather straps during prayer. A fringe is a thread hanging off a Jewish man's prayer shawl. Even today, some Jewish men put on phylacteries and prayer shawls when they pray. Jesus doesn't have a problem with the practice; he has a problem with doing the practice *in order* to be seen by others, which would drive someone to wear a phylactery bigger than necessary and fringe longer than it needs to be.

Let's confess those times when we performed the good deeds of a religious life so we could be seen in the "right way" by others. It probably wasn't wearing a leather box or prayer shawl, but it might have been wearing the right kinds of shoes to church, or showing off a handbag or brand of clothing at church. Or was it wearing a cross on your body or sticking on a cross bumper sticker so people would *see you* as a Christian? Or, when did you and I use our words to communicate to others that we were the "right kind" of Christian, the kind that believes all the right stuff – whatever "right stuff" is - just so people will think that we belong to the right crowd? In these times, we're hypocrites. We're pretenders at a part.

Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23). The scribes and Pharisees are wealthy. They can write the large checks, which in Jesus’ time meant giving in-kind gifts of expensive imported spices like mint and cummin. But the scribes and Pharisees don’t live by the Kingdom values like justice, mercy, and faith.

We’re hypocrites when we give our resources but we don’t live out the kind of life those resources were supposed to support. Hypocrisy looks like writing the check, or volunteering your time, or even serving on Sunday morning at church, but when it comes to opportunities for practicing justice to the poor, mercy for the downtrodden, and faith for doing the right thing instead of the easy thing, we fall short. We can give as many resources as we want, even to church, but without following up our resources with lives that reflect Jesus, we become hypocrites, pretenders at a part.

Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth” (Matthew 23:27). The scribes and Pharisees are like the sarcophagi of royalty: they’re beautiful on the outside but stuffed with decay on the inside. It’s a gruesome image, yes, but hypocrisy is gruesome. A hypocrite goes to the effort of looking good on the outside by saying the right words and giving off the right image, but there’s no heart on the inside and no follow-through of right living from the inside-out.

I remember the sarcophagi at Duke University where I went to seminary. There are three marble tombs in Duke Chapel, one containing the remains of Mr. Duke, the original benefactor of Duke University, and two containing the remains of Mr. Duke’s two sons. The tombs are beautiful, made of pristine white marble and topped with hand-carved, life-sized sculptures of the people whose remains dwell within. I was only able to afford seminary because I received a scholarship named after one of the people in those tombs, Benjamin Duke. I hope I never forget the conviction I felt when I first laid eyes on Benjamin Duke’s tomb. I thought, “Lord, thank you for the generosity of this man, and help me *never* to become like the beautiful tomb before me. Help me to show with my life that I’m not a whitewashed tomb. Help me to be alive on the inside, not dead. Help me to demonstrate with my words and actions that I have a sincere faith. Help me not to be a hypocrite, a person of dead faith pretending to be alive.”

Followers of Jesus change toward fruit: the fruit of a living faith. How does a hypocrite stop being a hypocrite? By bearing fruit of their faith. We must live out our faith in word, deed, and lifestyle, consistently and reliably over time and situation. A hypocrite is a hypocrite because there is no fruit to back up the faith they claim. A person is a whitewashed tomb because there

are no deeds on the outside to prove a living faith on the inside. Jesus calls us to change toward fruit now, while we're on the living side of the tomb.

Change with the End in Mind

The last of the five teaching blocks in Matthew is the Olivet Discourse in chapters 24 and 25.

Jesus leaves the Temple where he was preaching to any and all who would hear him, though he targeted his message to the scribes, Pharisees, and leaders of Israel. Jesus takes a seat on the Mount of Olives, a mountain ridge immediately to the east of Jerusalem, and preaches the Olivet Discourse. As with the Sermon on the Mount, the disciples climb a mountain to hear what Jesus has to say. There's no crowd here. The disciples are the only hearers. They ask Jesus for a sign that the time of Roman occupation is ending and the time of Jesus' reign in Jerusalem is beginning (Matthew 24:3). The disciples can't shake the false expectation that Jesus will overthrow the actual Roman government. They want to know when the coup will occur.

Jesus turns the conversation away from a military coup and directs the disciples to think in terms of his second coming. Jesus doesn't give us a sign to know when his return will be, nor does he give us a time for when it will happen. Jesus simply says, "Beware" (Matthew 24:4). We must beware, literally "be wary," or keep watch at all times, for Jesus to return at any moment.

Jesus does predict that a few things *will* happen. For one, Jesus predicts persecution for the church (Matthew 24:10). Jesus guarantees hardship for Christians just for being Christians, and not only for the earliest church, but for followers of Jesus in every time and place. Not all persecution will lead to actual martyrdom for the cause of Christ, though that certainly is still the case in many places around the world. Most persecution takes the form of friction between the ways of the Kingdom of God and the ways of the kingdoms of this world. The values of the Kingdom of God will always be different from the values of the world, and those differences will rub against each other like two pieces of sandpaper, causing struggle of all sizes for those who cling to the Kingdom paper for dear life. The struggles range from choosing Christian community over the rat race of work and extracurriculars, to giving money to God's causes rather than taking one more expensive vacation with your friends, to being the kindest person you can be when it feels like everyone around you is getting ahead by being a jerk. We must expect friction between the ways of Christ and the ways of the world.

Then, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus predicts a "desolating sacrilege" (Matthew 24:15), a real event that took place when a synagogue in Caesarea Philippi was desecrated by the Romans, leading to the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-73 AD. The Jewish rebels were outmatched, and the Romans pulled down the Temple in 70 AD.

Jesus says the Son of Man will return at some point in the future *after* the Temple falls (Matthew 24:29). The Son of Man is a title borrowed from the book of Daniel and refers to a human figure whom God will send at the end of time to usher in the everlasting age of God's reign on earth. Jesus *is* the Son of Man, and he makes it crystal clear that no one can possibly know when the Son of Man will return- not even Jesus himself when he spoke these words (Matthew 24:36). There's simply no point wasting our time trying to predict when Jesus will return. It's impossible to know. "Keep awake," says Jesus, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." (Matthew 24:42).

What does this mean for followers of Christ? It means we're to change with the end in mind. Jesus could return at any moment. The end could be right *now*. Therefore, we should make the changes in our life that must be made with a deep sense of expectancy. Expectancy means something will happen, it's sure and certain, though we can't be totally sure when the event will occur. Followers of Christ must take on a sense of expectancy about the return of Christ. Jesus is coming, it's sure and certain, so let's change toward him now while we have the chance.

One of my pastor friends has a framed picture in her office. The picture is a print-out of Jesus standing at a closed door, knocking. The text on the picture says, "Jesus is coming. Look busy." That's right. Jesus is coming at any moment. We need to look busy. We need to *be* busy with the business of Christ in the world: curing the sick, feeding the hungry, befriending the lonely, loving enemies, eating with sinners, and showing mercy and forgiveness to all.

Jesus gives three final parables about the Kingdom of God in Matthew 25, and in each, Jesus is communicating the need for expectancy for his return. We've already discussed the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13), where Jesus' cautions us to be like the five wise bridesmaids who keep watch for the bridegroom (that would be Jesus) by being ready for the bridegroom to show up at any time.

Then comes the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Followers of Jesus should *not* be like the slave who takes the talent - which was a unit of weight, not a skill, measuring 75 pounds of gold or silver - and buries it in the ground. We should *not* do nothing with our resources until Christ returns, biding our time and playing it safe. No, we should be busy with Christ's business. We should deploy the resources God has given us, all of our calendar, bank account, and mental and body strength for the purposes of the Kingdom of God, or else Jesus might return and catch us hoarding what we've been given.

Jesus ends the Olivet Discourse, and his entire teaching ministry on earth, with the Parable of the Judgement of the Nations (Matthew 25:31-46). This Parable is Jesus' final sermon illustration. When the Son of Man comes, he will gather all peoples to himself and separate us like sheep from goats. Jesus will say to the sheep:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:34-36, 40).”

What makes a goat, a goat is the brutal truth that goats had the chance to feed Jesus, give water to Jesus, welcome Jesus when Jesus was a stranger, clothe Jesus when Jesus was naked, and visit Jesus when Jesus was sick and in prison, but the goats did not do it. Jesus was and is the least of these. Jesus is the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the impoverished, the sick, and the prisoner. The sheep are those who love Jesus in the least of these; the goats are those who had the chance to love Jesus but threw away their shot.

We want to be the sheep, but let's not kid around: most of the times, we're the goat. Jesus wants to convict us. We need to change with the end in mind. In the end, Jesus will reward the sheep and tell the goats, “Not so fast. You're not ready for the Kingdom of God.” In the end, those who are goats *now*, on this side of the Kingdom, will become the least of these *then*, when the Kingdom comes. Those who do not love the least of these now will be strangers to the Kingdom when the Kingdom arrives. It's in the sheep's job description to keep loving the stranger. That means the goats of this life will become the missionary objects of the sheep in the Kingdom, those who need loving, rescuing, redemption. Hope is not lost for the goats, but Jesus wants to make it clear that we don't want to be a goat. It's better to be a sheep.

When we see events in the news that disturb us, stories of human beings being cast out, treated with malice, abused and neglected, and when we have to face disasters and tragedies that we'll never totally understand, we'll never know exactly *why* these things happen, but Jesus does give us the *now what*, the thing we're to do now, no matter what horror we see and experience: be the sheep. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Change with the end in mind. In the end, Jesus will return and hold us accountable for the ways we did and did not love the least of these. Jesus is the Undercover Boss. Jesus is hidden, *incognito* in the least of these, and like the undercover bosses from the cable TV show, Jesus will reward those employees of his (that's everybody) who treated him with good customer service and teamwork. But he'll confront the employees who treated him poorly with the consequences of their actions. It's better, eternally better, to be the sheep.

I remember two instances where I walked in on my youngest daughter, Amelia, without her seeing me. In one instance, Amelia, two years old at the time, WAS playing with her older sister's Barbies. Amelia was playing nicely, sweet as could be. I made a point to tell her later that I was proud of her for treating her daughter's toys with respect. But in the second instance, I found Amelia, still two years old, destroying her sister's intricate Lego creations, pieces that took many hours to complete. I told her I was angry and warned her not to do it again. In both instances, my daughter didn't know I was watching, but I made it clear to her that I *was* watching and would be rewarding her, or not, for what I saw her do.

Let us keep watch, therefore, because Jesus is watching us. We must change with the end in mind, meaning with the expectancy that Jesus will return, it could be *right now*, and hold us accountable for what Jesus saw us do, refuse to do, or simply not care to do.

The author Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of Chiel Reichman.² Reichman was a Holocaust survivor. He escaped from the Treblinka concentration camp and wandered around, lost in Poland in the winter. He decided his best chance for survival was to walk 50 miles in the snow to Warsaw. He's starving, a living skeleton with almost zero chance of making it to Warsaw. He meets a farmer, and the farmer says, "Have something to eat." He meets a second farmer, who also feeds him, and gives him directions to the nearest town. He meets a third person, who asks him, "Are you a Jew?" The third person was a Christian, and this Christian took him home. The Christian's wife gave Chiel their only extra shirt. They housed him for two weeks. Chiel met a fourth person who gave him a ride down the road. Chiel makes it to Warsaw. He meets another person who lets him crash at his place. He meets another person who gives him a job. Gladwell estimates Chiel Reichman was saved from the Nazis by eleven acts of kindness. Each act of kindness was small, entry-level caring, a temporary suspension of indifference. Each act of kindness on its own was underwhelming, but taken together, each act of kindness was a step in saving a life.

Changing with the end in mind doesn't need to be overwhelming. This kind of change looks like a long chain of acts of kindness, where your entire life is held together, link by link, by acts of kindness to the least of these who flit in and out of your life- food given here, an extra shirt there, a ride to work, letting the neighbor kid crash on your couch, listening to a new friend as if they were the only person in the world. Such is Kingdom living, the Jesus way.

In the end, Jesus wants to see the links of kindness in your life. Give him as many links as you can. He's on his way. Look busy.

² Malcolm Gladwell. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRGpkeBYLpc>

Leader Guide

Ask someone to read Matthew 25:1-13. Ask if there are any initial questions or inspirations in reaction to the text.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the first part of today's lesson, David talks about the difference between the time for getting ready for a wedding, and the time when the wedding actually begins. This distinction is important in the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, where five bridesmaids assume the groom, who represents Jesus, will show up at the time for getting ready (these are the foolish bridesmaids), while the other five bridesmaids expect the groom to arrive much later (these are the wise). David says this: "*Now* is the advertised time on the wedding invitation. *Now* is the time for getting ready. The groom could show up at any moment in the future, between ten seconds and ten thousand years from now. Now may not be the time when the wedding actually begins, or when Jesus makes his grand entrance, but now is the time for getting ready for his grand entrance." What does David mean by this? Why is now the time for getting ready for Jesus to return?

2. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, meaning a change of mind, leading to a change of heart, leading to a change of life. This means repentance starts with changing our minds about a something. But changing a person's mind is hard! When is the last time you saw a person change their mind? When have you changed your mind about something important? When have you seen someone change their mind, then they changed their life?

3. Why is it important that Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey? Why do you think the symbolism of the donkey would matter to the people in Jerusalem, the people who shouted, "Hosanna!"?

4. David says toward the middle of the lesson: "Rather than creating *barriers* between people and God, religion is for creating *bridges* between people and God. There are too many barriers in religion, and far too few bridges. We need to be bridge-builders, which means we need to change, and change *now*. The underlying reason why Jesus disturbs the peace in the Temple is because Jesus wants to induce a sense of urgency in the organized religion of Israel, urgency to reform itself totally and immediately." Where do you see Christianity putting barriers between people and God? (Be honest and kind in your conversation!) Where do you see Christianity putting bridges between people and God? Where do you see reform happening in Christianity for the sake of building more bridges?

5. Then David says this about our need to make the changes in our lives we need to make: “In what ways do you need to make a change today? It could be a reduction in your hurry- you’re so overcommitted, there’s no margin in your life, and something has to give. It could be a change of diet or exercise. It could be an increase in the amount of time you give to service and compassion for others. Or a change in your tone of voice and choice of words when you’re speaking to others, especially your loved ones- you could be kinder and softer, speaking less and listening more. Or the change could be a spiritual discipline: reading your Bible more, praying daily more, coming together with friends in community more, attending worship more, giving generously to God’s causes, including the church, more. Whatever the change, it probably won’t happen unless you and I induce a sense of urgency in ourselves.” What sorts of changes do you need to make in your life? How can you induce a sense of urgency, a sense of this-must-happen-now, so that you actually make the change?

6. Jesus turns up the heat on the religious leadership of Israel. Jesus gets spicy with them. He looks them in the eye and tells them they have failed the people of Israel, so now God is raising up new leaders, namely, the followers of Jesus. Why do you think the religious leaders refused to listen to Jesus? In other words, why don’t the religious leaders change their ways and repent?

7. David references an author named David Brooks, who makes a distinction between resume values and eulogy values. Resume values are what the world thinks is important. Eulogy values are what is important in the Kingdom of God. Make your own list of resume values and eulogy values. What is on your list?

8. In Matthew 22, Jesus lifts up three values of the Kingdom of God: hospitality, integrity, and love. Who are the people in your life who embody these values? How can you imitate them?

9. Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees “whitewashed tombs.” The image is supposed to represent hypocrisy. How does the image of the whitewashed tomb point to hypocrisy? When you look at the Christians in your life or in the media, where do you see whitewashed tombs? When have you been the whitewashed tomb?

10. David says this toward the end of the lesson: “In the end, those who are goats *now*, on this side of the Kingdom, will become the least of these *then*, when the Kingdom comes. Those who do not love the least of these now will be strangers to the Kingdom when the Kingdom arrives. It’s in the sheep’s job description to keep loving the stranger. That means the goats of this life will become the missionary objects of the sheep in the Kingdom, those who need loving, rescuing, redemption. Hope is not lost for the goats, but Jesus wants to make it clear that we don’t want to be a goat. It’s better to be a sheep.” What do you make of this? Do you agree that hope is not lost for the goats?

11. In what ways can you be more of a sheep and less of a goat?