

Be Wise

Matthew 25:1-13

“Don’t share with negligent people. If you do, there may not be enough for either of you. Be selfish and you will enter the banquet of the kingdom of heaven...”

Most of you may be thinking: what are you talking about? What you just said is not very Christian. Jesus calls us to live generous lives. How in the world do you dare to say: Do not share, be selfish and the kingdom of heaven will be yours! That goes against Christian principles and values.

At first sight, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* seems to be promoting selfishness. “It seems that, according to this parable, to be wise means to be selfish; to be wise means to refuse to come to the aid of another in need.”¹ Not only that, but we also know that the parable is used to provide a description of the Kingdom of God: a realm that is supposed to be a place where we love our neighbors and come to their aid; a realm of unity and inclusiveness, not of division and exclusion.

This parable may lead us to question several things. How will a loving God, who is always knocking at the door, give the cold answer, “*I don’t know you*” to those who came knocking? How can a grace-full God who makes space for last-minute workers and rewards them as full-time employees be so harsh to five young women who run out of oil? There is something wrong with this parable. Or, there must be something that we are missing.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins appears only in the Gospel of Matthew. Many people consider this parable to be in sharp contrast with the rest of the gospel narrative. Even within the chapter where this parable is told, we find another parable with an apparent contrasting message. At the end of Matthew 25, we hear Jesus encouraging his disciples to: “Feed the poor, satisfy the thirsty, invite the stranger, visit the sick and those who are in prison, and protect those who are vulnerable.” Yet, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* seems to have a different spin on it.

What’s going on? Why there is a seeming disconnect?

I want to say that there is not such disconnect with what Matthew is telling and the general narrative of the Gospel. It is true! Jesus calls us to care for those who are vulnerable; yet, the Lord also calls us to live responsible lives.

At the outset of the story, the Bible says that the virgins went out to meet the bridegroom. The very first statement of the parable does not describe these young gals in terms of wise and

¹ Nancy J. Duff, 1985. "Wise and foolish maidens, Matthew 25:1-13." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40, no. 3: 55-58. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 6, 2017), 55.

foolish. It only says that ten young women took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

As you read through the parable, you realize that all of them received the same invitation, and that all of them went to the same house/place. All of them carried lamps with them. “*They all became drowsy and fell asleep*” (v. 5). The ten young women had far more similarities than differences. If they had so many things in common, why were five of them considered foolish while the rest were considered full of wisdom?

The difference is made by the way each group prepared. “*The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps*” (vv. 3-4).

This parable is about making preparations. It is about taking proper measures and making sure that we are equipping ourselves with everything we need to accomplish the mission God has given to us. This parable calls us to not only show up, but to come with the “tools” needed to execute our work with consistency. Perhaps the most important tool we bring is our attentiveness and willingness to make ourselves ready.

Here is the first thing I learn from this parable. **Wise people make preparations.**

1. Wise people make preparations. They are prepared for the unexpected.

If we are objective, we will acknowledge that the foolish virgins had some degree of preparation. At least, they had their lamps with them. They had made preparations for at least a short period of time. We could even blame the bridegroom because if he would have not been late, five of the women would have never run out of oil.

But, that’s exactly the point the parable is trying to make. The foolish virgins were only prepared for immediate, proximate, nearby needs. The difference between the wise and the foolish was “that the wise were ready for a long delay and the foolish were not.”² “The question the parable raises is this: ‘Are you ready for a long delay?’”³

This question could be asked in different ways. Are you ready to stay put even when God seems to be running behind? Are you able to persevere when things take a little bit longer than expected? Can you endure the seeming absence of God in your life? Is your spiritual well deep enough to draw from even during times of drought? Are you ready for a long delay?

The big difference between the wise and the foolish maids was not preparation per se. Both groups were kind of prepared in their own ways. The major difference was determined by what they were ready for. The foolish virgins were ready for a “coming,” not for a delay. The wise

² Robert D. Young, 2000. "Matthew 25:1-13." *Interpretation* 54, no. 4: 419-422. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 6, 2017), 420.

³ Ibid.

virgins were prepared for both. Church, wise people not only make preparations; they also prepare for the unexpected.

2. Wise people hold others accountable.

But, why couldn't the wise women give some oil to those who did not prepare for a delay? I think that would have been nice. Probably they would have been rewarded for having a generous heart.

Church, the bible teaches about generosity, and it also teaches about accountability. God's word speaks of grace and also judgment. If we only preach grace without judgment or love without holiness, or faith without works, we are doing a disservice to our neighbors and we fail to appreciate the rich complexity of the biblical message. I believe this parable is teaching us about accountability. We need to be accountable and hold others accountable.

Why didn't the five unwise virgins buy extra oil ahead of time? For sure, it was not a lack of money since they went to the oil dealer when pressure was put on them. What was it then? A "do not be preoccupied with duties in life" philosophy?

When Jesus said, "do not worry about tomorrow," he was talking about the cares of life, not our duties as participants of the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, the parable is talking about being occupied, not pre-occupied, and doing the things we have to do when we have the time, strength, and resources to do them. The parable is calling us to act with responsibility and mindfulness instead of living with an attitude of last-minute solutions. **Wise people understand the times and do what is right for the moment.**

"The five were foolish because they were naively optimistic. They were the type of people who assume that the world will always take care of them. They represent those who do not want to stand on their feet or take responsibility for their own lives (acts). They believed that someone else would always be around to pick up the tab or pick up the pieces. 'If we run out of oil our friends will help. If we are gone when the bridegroom arrives, he will wait. And if worse comes to worst and we have to arrive late, the bridegroom will let us in.'"⁴

We need to get rid of any "easygoingness" mentality that places on others the greatest chunk of the weight. Of course, I know I have a community that will pick me up when I fall, carry me when I am weak, heal me when I am wounded, and so forth.

I have no problem letting you come to my rescue, and you should have no problem letting others come to your rescue. However, I am going to do everything in my power to make sure that I don't get more care and attention than what I really need. I am going to make sure that in our

⁴ Duff, 56.

interdependent relationship, I am contributing as much as I am able. I will keep myself in line because I don't want others picking up the pieces that my lack of responsibility can cause.

We need to hold ourselves accountable to such standards. We need to hold each other accountable and be sure that we are making the most of every opportunity. The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity...*" (Ephesians 5:15-16 NIV).

Holding each other accountable is hard work. It's demanding, at times painful, but also necessary. Jesus calls us to love one another. Loving and holding one another accountable **ARE NOT** mutually exclusive. These two are related in such a way that the latter (holding people accountable) is usually a manifestation of the former (loving people). Are you ready to be held accountable and at the same time return the favor?

3. Wise people know that life lessons apply, first and foremost, to them, before it applies to anybody else.

In an article she wrote about this parable, Nancy Duff writes:

"If there were ever a time in the Church's history when the Church was called from its foolishness, from its heedless lack of preparation—if there were ever a time in the Church's history when the Church was called to be wise, to be prepared for the unexpected and the exceptional—that time is now...

If there were ever a time when the Church was called from naive optimism—called away from depending on other people, other agencies [the government], other institutions to do our task—that time is now. How many times have we counted on someone else to light the way of God's Kingdom? How many times have we said "I'm too depressed. I'm too busy. I'm too powerless. I'm groping (fumbling) around in the darkness myself—how can I shine as a light for anyone else?" We are in danger of letting our lamps go out. But we think that surely someone else will pull us through; someone else will do our job *for* us, instead of us. If there has ever been a time when we were called out of Pollyanna (excessive) optimism about the world—that time is now."⁵

My invitation to you this morning is to be wise, to make preparation not only for the coming of Christ, but also for the unexpected delay. I am inviting you to carefully examine, in light of the Scriptures, the times we are living in, understand what's going on, and do what is right for our era. I am inviting you to be accountable and hold others accountable. I am inviting you to be a church that is prepared and does not wait for someone else to light the way of God's Kingdom.

The Word of God for the people of God...

⁵ Ibid, 56-57.