

The Ten Maidens

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

July 29, 2018 – AM Sermon

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Matthew 25:1-13

Before I read this morning's parable, let me remind you of the two parables we've focused on the last two weeks. Two weeks ago Ruth preached on the parable of the Lost Coin, a parable that showed God sweeping the house, determined to find the lost souls. Amazing grace. And then last week our brother John Rottman preached on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. There we saw a wretched sinful wreck of a man fall on his knees before God, and God gives him mercy; God washes him clean. Also amazing grace. Now let's listen to this week's parable. I think you will hear a slightly different tone and emphasis. Read Matthew 25:1-13.

So that's quite a contrast with the last two weeks, isn't it? In the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector the door to the Kingdom of heaven seems like a wide open door, and God is standing at the door and he's smiling and He's saying, "Come in! Come in! Come in!" But in this parable the door gets shut, and the bridegroom shouts through the door, "*Go away! I don't know you! I never knew you! You have no place here!*" So different. It's not just the way God is portrayed that seems to change from those parables; it's the way we are portrayed too! In those other parables, people don't do anything to gain admission to the Kingdom. The coin doesn't save itself; it's helpless and lost and it is the grace and determination of the Lord that finds it. The Tax Collector too has no strength or goodness to trade for his salvation; he just falls on his knees and God picks him up and washes him clean. But in this parable our actions seem really important. What we do, or what we don't do matters. A lot. In this parable, we are standing with our lamps in our hands, and Jesus looks us straight in the eye and says, "*Do you have any oil for that thing? Because if you don't have oil for that lamp....*" Those other two parables leave us with tears of gratitude before a God who saves a wretch like me. This parable leaves us wondering: "*Do I have enough oil!? Am I a wise virgin or a foolish one? Jesus, what is this oil you're talking about and how do I get it? How do I make sure I'm not on the wrong side of the door?!*" If the other parables are a hug, this one is a poke in the ribs. Maybe a kick.

But as we said, this too is the word of the Lord and it is a word for us. And by for us, I mean for *us*. One of the reasons this parable seems so different from those other two is that it's directed at a different audience. If you look at the context of the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15, Jesus is talking to sinners and broken people. He's talking to the lost. That parable is aimed at the miserable souls who know that they are broken. So if you have neighbor who's a lost or broken soul, and you want to explain to her how God feels about her the parable of the lost coin

is the appropriate choice. You wouldn't tell her our parable. It's not aimed at her. Who is Jesus talking to in our parable? You've got to go back to Matthew 24:3 to see that. This parable is in the middle of a long, sermon length speech from Jesus. In Matthew, it's Jesus' last sermon before he heads to the cross. It's not a gentle sermon. Chapter 24 is a long list of all the terrible things that will happen in the world before the Son of Man returns. The sermon ends with the three parables of Chapter 25 and all three of these parables are parables of judgment and confrontation. I wouldn't exactly call it a fire and brimstone sermon, but I would call it a stern warning. This warning is for insiders. Go look at Matthew 24:3 and you will see that Jesus is on the Mount of Olives and it explicitly says that this is a private teaching for his disciples. "*The disciples came to him privately.*" This parable is for us, regular church folks who feel like they are comfortably on the inside of church. So, it's not to unbelievers out there that this parable asks, "Do you have oil in that lamp?" It's us. Jesus asks us, "Do you have oil in your lamp? You're going to need oil."

So...do you? Have Oil? In your lamp? When the bridegroom returns will you have oil in your lamp? I think so. I hope so. How do I know? What does that even mean? How can I know whether or not I have this oil in my lamp if I don't even know what the oil is?

There are a couple places to go in the gospel of Matthew if you want to know what the oil is. The first place is Matthew 5:15-16. Jesus uses lamp imagery there too. He says: "*When people light a lamp they don't put it under a bowl, instead they put it on a stand so it gives light to the whole house. In the same way let your light shine before many so that they might see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" There's another lamp reference and here the oil is your good deeds. Another place to look is the two parables that follow ours. They are part of the same sermon and so it makes sense to think that they might give us clues about what the oil might be. The other two parables are the parable of the talents and the parable of the sheep and the goats. In those parables Jesus calls us to invest our gifts in the service of the kingdom and he calls us to share our resources with the poor, the imprisoned and the strangers. So in this case it looks like the oil is us giving our heart and soul and mind to the work of the kingdom. So put it all together and a picture emerges: a person who has a lamp but no oil is someone who has the outer forms of faith, but not the heart and the actions. A person who has a lamp but no oil is a person who has a tool shop full of the tools of faith, all shiny and impressive, all laid out proudly for the world to see, but who never uses the tools. "There's the table saw and the lathe and all the clamps all neatly pegged on a board...but the owner never fixes anything, never builds anything. So when Jesus asks do you have oil in your lamp, he's asking, "Does your Christianity have calluses or do you like having fancy tools?" "Does your Christianity have calluses or are you holding that hammer with a soft pink, unpracticed hand?"

So, now that we know what the oil is, I ask you again, "Do you have oil in your lamp? Does your Christianity have calluses? "I don't mean to be a scold or a nag. I would much rather

preach about the open door of the kingdom and God's unending love for his children, but that's not on the top of Jesus's agenda in this parable. And believe me that makes me as uncomfortable as the rest of you.

As I thought about having oil in my lamp I thought of our fall sermon series from two falls ago. Do you remember that series? Does anyone remember two year old sermons? That was the POWER series. In that series we focused on the basic habits, basic practices of faith. They are 5 different kinds of oil you put into your lamps. These practices don't create faith – only God does that by His Holy Spirit. But if you are following these practices the Spirit has promised to use them to make your faith healthy. If you are not following these practices your faith is probably sputtering and dim. If you are practicing them, your lamp probably has a pretty good flame. Do you remember the 5 practices? There was one practice for each of the 5 letters of the word POWER. They were prayer, outreach, worship, education, and relationship.

Prayer – personal conversation with God.

Outreach – using your gifts and resources to bless the lost and the weak.

Worship – faithfully meeting with God's people.

Education – studying the things of God.

Relationship – building deep connections within the body of Christ.

This is oil. Put this oil in your lamp and you may still feel tired sometimes, you may get worn out, you may still find yourself perplexed on occasion, but the Spirit will make you shine.

So far this sermon has been mostly warning and instruction. And I think that's in keeping with Jesus' purposes in the parable, that's in keeping with Jesus' larger purpose within this longer discourse, this sermon at the end of Matthew.

But this parable is more than warning and instruction. It is also gospel and grace. And the good news is: the Bridegroom is coming. Jesus, the bridegroom is coming. I know that doesn't sound like good news sometimes. I can remember as a child having a dream about the second coming of Jesus. I was 10 years old standing in a field and, in a scene right out of Revelation, the clouds were rippling and scrolling back, there were trumpets blaring, thunder was rolling through the sky. I can remember knowing for sure that this was it: the second coming. Christ the judge was coming. And I remember being absolutely terrified. Frightened out of my mind. What was Jesus going to say about me? I felt like a person who is on trial who has just heard that the jury has reached a verdict and who is waiting for the thing to be read. It was a nightmare. Somehow I had heard these parables and stories in such a way, that for me the second coming was something to fear. All our failures and mediocrity will be exposed.

But in this story Jesus does not come back to expose our failures and mediocrity. He's not the heavenly jury foreman ready to read the verdict. In this parable Jesus comes back as the bridegroom ready to start a wedding party. Love is the cause of his journey. It is the love of his

bride – that’s us – which motivates his return. Love is at the beginning of his trip, love is in the middle, and love is at the end. And love and joy will be at the center of this wedding party.

So all this work of putting oil in our lamps and getting ready, this isn’t grim duty! This isn’t miserable task! This is wedding planning! This is party preparation! Getting ready for a wedding is not a miserable thing, right? It’s work. It has moments of frustration. It has moments when you are worn out from all the lists and calls and emails and decisions, but at bottom this is exciting! This is a party. You aren’t dreading it. You can hardly wait till the day is here! All this gathering of oil and putting it in our lamps, it’s all party preparation. Jesus is coming and we get to rehearse the wedding songs. We get to put on our new wedding clothes. We get to clean the house for the reception, pick up the junk lying around, put up twinkle lights, and make sure the lawn and garden are beautiful. And we get to invite people to share the party! The Bridegroom has said he wants everyone to come to this wedding so we get to tell all our friends about the great big festival of love and joy that the Bridegroom is preparing for them. We get to help them with their lamps, teach them about the oil. It’s not fearful work; it’s work full of joy and wonder.

The bridegroom is coming. Love will have the last word. Everlasting joy will crown our heads. Sorrow and sighing will flee away. That’s something worth lighting a lamp for.

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