

Some see this Gospel from Matthew as a message of warning by Jesus to the Jews of his day who should have been prepared for his coming but were not. Others see it as a parable of Jesus that was reworked by Matthew to be used in the conflict between first-century Christians and hostile Jews. Still others see it as a reference by Jesus to his second coming, at which time those who are ready will join Jesus and those who are not ready will be shut out. While any or all of these interpretations may be correct, we need to remember that a parable makes one point. We do not need to make it into an allegory in which every person and every action stands for a particular person or situation. It is more important to apply this parable to ourselves than to limit its application to people in the past or the future.

The first thing this parable says to me is that whatever you want to do or to be, there is a need to prepare. All ten bridesmaids had prepared their lamps so they would be able to march in procession accompanying the bridegroom, and no doubt the bride, to their new home. When the group arrived at the couple's new home, there would be a celebration, and though the girls were not part of the official wedding party, they would be welcome at the festivities because of the part they played in lighting the wedding parade.

We are apt to attribute someone's success in a field to certain natural gifts possessed by the successful person, but more often success is a result of preparation. For example, in sport, Edson Arantes do Nascimento more commonly known as Pele was seen as one of the greatest soccer players of all time who played for his club Santos and country Brazil. He was awarded best football player of the 20th century by the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) and the best athlete of the 20th century by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). What made him such a winner was practice in season and out of season, especially practicing unusual shots with either foot outside the penalty area. He practiced those shots so much that he could do them in any direction. In his later career he became a great play-maker. He may have had a gift, but he was also the best prepared member of his team.

The second thing this parable says to me is that as we prepare to reach our goal, we must also prepare for the unexpected. In the parable the bridegroom's coming was delayed. Five of the bridesmaids prepared for that eventuality; they brought extra oil. There's a story told about a Cornish farmer who had difficulty keeping a hired man because his farm was located on the west coast of England, where storms roared in off the Atlantic. It was a miserable place to be. The farmer looked and looked for help. Finally, a man came and applied for the job. He was a little fellow. He didn't look very strong and appeared to be past middle age. He looked like he could be on his last legs. But he was the only person the farmer had found. The farmer asked him, "Are you a good helper to a farmer?" The man answered in his Cornish accent, "I can sleep when the wind blows." When the farmer said, "I don't understand," the little fellow repeated, "I can sleep when the wind blows." The farmer didn't know what that meant, but he took the man on because he desperately needed help. The man worked well around the farm and seemed to be effective. Then one night the farmer could hear the wind kicking up and beginning to blow. He got out of bed, lit the lantern, went to the barn where the hired man was sleeping and shook him awake. "The storm is coming and the wind is howling," the farmer shouted. "We have to do something fast." The hired man looked at

him and said, "No, sir, I told you, I can sleep when the wind blows." The farmer went outside and saw that all the haystacks had been covered by tarpaulins, all the chickens were in coops, all the cows were in the barn, all of the things that could have blown away were secured and all doors and shutters closed. Indeed, the hired man could sleep when the wind blew. He was prepared when it came to regular farm work, and he was able to deal with a change of circumstances.

There are some preparations that can't be put off until the last minute. It's too late for a student to begin preparing for an exam when the day of examination has come. It is too late to acquire a skill when a job comes along that requires us to already have that skill. It is the same in our relationship with God. It is told of Queen Mary of William and Mary fame that when she was dying, her chaplain came to speak to her about her relationship with God. "My friend," she answered gently, "I did not leave such an important matter till this hour." Circumstances can change quickly. The day of death is not the time to begin thinking about the place of God in our lives.

Another thing this parable says to me is that there are some things in life that can't be borrowed from others. The five bridesmaids without extra oil could not get by on the preparations of others. When they tried to borrow oil, they were refused. They would have to go back into the town to see if they could find a merchant who would open his store to sell them oil. It is that way in many situations in life. For example, we cannot get by on somebody else's education. We may have gifted teachers who are willing to share their education, but the student must take responsibility for assimilating what is taught. Jesse Jackson, civil rights activist speaking about the education of inner city children, said, "We keep saying that Johnny can't read because he's deprived, hungry, and discriminated against.... The reason Johnny can't read well is that Johnny doesn't practice reading". Personal responsibility is also important to the development of one's spiritual life.

I met a man in Casterton in the western district who told me that he had been a Presbyterian all his life. He was born a Presbyterian, he said. In fact, his great-grandfather was a Presbyterian minister. When I asked him how he and his family happened to attend our church, he acknowledged that it was actually his wife and children who attended. He couldn't make it. It turned out that he hadn't made it to church for years. On the strength of that decision rested the assessment that his family was Presbyterian for generations. As lovingly as possible I tried to point out to him that each person has to decide for himself to follow Christ, and after that decision, a person may decide to identify with one church or another. He was not ready to go that far. The discussion ended with an invitation for him to come and worship with us. He did not do so. He was content with a borrowed religion.

The fourth thing this parable says to me is that in every field opportunities pass. When the members of the wedding party arrived at the bridegroom's house, all those who accompanied him were invited in and the door was shut. This doesn't necessarily suggest that the girls who weren't ready were lost. They suffered disappointment because they could not participate in the wedding festivities. There would be other weddings and other parties, but this one was closed to them because they were not ready.

In a nursery where trees and plants are sold in Cardiff, Wales there is a sign in the tree section that reads: "The best time to plant a tree was 25 years ago..." a sobering jolt that reminds one that trees take a long time to mature. Some oak trees, for example, are sixty years old before they bear any acorns. But that isn't the whole story of that sign in the Welsh nursery. The complete message is:

“The best time to plant a tree was 25 years ago. The second best time is today.” That sign is a reminder that the opportunity is still open. A tree can still be planted, in spite of the squandered opportunities of 25 years ago. The door is still open, and as long as it is, there is still opportunity to act. The parable of the ten bridesmaids reminds us that to reach our goal we need to prepare, we need to be ready to deal with the unexpected, we need to rely on our own personal experiences, and we need to act when the opportunity presents itself because opportunities pass. Shakespeare expressed this very well:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, Leads on to fortune.
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat
And we must take the current when it serves
Or lose our ventures.*

(Julius Caesar , Act IV, scene iii)

Jesus reminds us of all this in the conclusion of this parable when he says: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (v. 13).

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