

SERMON – “Ready...Set...”
Matthew 25:1-13
Mike Samson

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¹“Then 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.”

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If your reaction is anything like mine was in reading through this or hearing it for the first time, it's not a pleasant one. So many questions:

Why didn't the bridesmaids share their oil with each other? Didn't Jesus tell us to share what we have with other? Why didn't the bridegroom let the late bridesmaids in? Doesn't Jesus say, “knock, and the door will be opened?” What in the world is happening here? What's Jesus' point in telling this story?

This parable, like all parables, are about much more than just a group of unprepared bridesmaids. One might understand it better by recognizing each character and component as representing biblical characters and themes. Jesus is the bridegroom. We, the people of God, are the bridesmaids, and we have lamps to shine. Jesus said, “let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.” Matt 5:16. The oil is the fuel of that fire – in short, the life of discipleship: prayer, reading the Bible, worship, service, cultivating the fruits of the Spirit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness.

What does it take to keep your light shining?

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Are you ready to shine? Are you set? Are you prepared?

I. Preparation

A good friend of mine coaches a college soccer team. When I first met him, he and another friend invited me to go running with them. I said, “sure!” I figured, “this will be good exercise...I’ve been needing some cardio!” My one friend routinely ran long-distances; 5K’s, half-marathons. The other, the soccer coach, was involved in regular conditioning with his team. It was part of his *job* to be ready to run. I, on the other hand, was in no way, shape or form ready to run. It had been a long time since I was in anything resembling good running shape.

The run, predictably, was painful. My face looked like a ripe tomato by the end of it, while my friends had broken a sweat but just seemed to be warming up. Their tanks were full. Mine was past empty.

In every area of life, we recognize the need to put in effort in order to stay prepared and remain in good shape. We know that we need to go to the gym to stay physically fit. If we want to run a 5K, or even jog with friends we need to prepare by exercise. If we want to stay ‘fiscally fit,’ we know that we need to *not* spend every dime we earn. In order to be prepared for retirement, or to be as

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prepared as we can for the unexpected car or home repair, it's a good idea to have a plan for saving what we can. We recognize that there are consequences to not studying for a test. They come in the form of an “F,” and all of the short and long-term consequences that follow that.

Yet, somehow, we often fail to apply the same logic to the life of discipleship. What we miss is that being a disciple involves *discipline*. Discipline is at the root of the word *discipleship*.

What Jesus is pointing out here is this: there is such a thing as being an unprepared disciple. There are, in fact, consequences to it.

Why would this surprise us? I think part of the answer is that, at some point, Jesus seems to have gotten watered-down to a pretty innocuous character, one that doesn't bear much of a resemblance to the Jesus of the Bible. Somewhere along the line we got sick of “fire-and-brimstone” themes in the Bible and decided to focus on the more comforting and positive themes, like love, forgiveness, patience and kindness. Of course, these are great biblical themes, but they are not ideas in a vacuum. Removing them from their place in the Bible has consequences. In some circles this the result is the “prosperity gospel.” The

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prosperity gospel tells us something like this: “The only thing you need to know is that God wants to you to be happy and prosperous. Don’t worry about anything else. How you treat each other, learning from Jesus about how to live this life in a way that follows his teachings. Jesus loves you, end of story.” The Bible tells us something more like this: “Jesus loves you, beginning of story! You are loved as you are, but you are not left there! You are invited to follow the Way, learn the Truth, and the Life God wants for you and for the world God loves!”

The results of distorted pictures of Jesus are reflected in the media. One example of this may be seen in a movie from the late-90’s called Dogma, which starred Matt Damon, Ben Affleck and the late-comedian and cultural critic, George Carlin. I’m not endorsing this movie as a whole, but there is a good illustration in it. Damon and Affleck are angels that have somehow messed up and gotten tossed out of heaven. George Carlin is a pastor in Red Bank, NJ (not far from where I’m from!) with a parish that’s dwindling. To solve his problems, Carlin decides that the church needs an updated image. The cross and the crucifixion are just too negative and depressing. So, he decides to retire the cross and replace it with a figure that looks like a cartoon character, with a big smile and thumbs-up pose, called “Buddy Christ.” “No worries, no consequences...we’re all good!”

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No worries...no consequences...is that true? Not according to Jesus. Not according to this parable.

Notice that all the bridesmaids fall asleep in this parable. What’s happening there? In the New Testament, sleep is often euphemism for death. With that in mind, one of the questions posed to is this: At the end of my time here, will I feel ready? Or will I feel regretful? Will I feel regretful of majoring in the minors and minoring of the majors? Nurses and chaplains note that among the top regrets of those facing death are things like wishing they’d spent more time with their family, wishing they’d argued with their loved ones less, wishing they’d cared less about what other people think.

A life of discipleship forces us to deal with these issues all throughout our lives. It is a life with a purpose defined by Jesus and not by the world or by ourselves. It is therefore, an abundant life. Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance.”

A final consequence this parable puts before us is this: No one can fill up your oil for you. You are finally responsible for maintaining a sufficient supply of oil. Notice that the bridesmaids

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who had plenty of oil did not share their oil with the bridesmaids who did not have enough. What’s going on here? Earlier we talked about the oil in this parable representing things like prayer, Bible study, worship, service, forgiveness, etc. These are all things in which others can encourage us and give us opportunities to participate and learn. However, they cannot do *for* us. No one can pray for you. No one can come to church for you, or hear or read the Bible for you. No one can forgive for you, or love for you. Others can help teach this to you, but you must do it. You bear responsibility for it. Just like no one can go to the gym regularly for you, no one can worship regularly or do any of these things for you either.

So the question remains...do you have enough oil to keep your lamp lit? Are you prepared to let your light shine? Are you ready? Are you set?