

Sermon

Be Prepared

Amos 5, Matthew 25:1-13

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The people of Israel had longed for the Day of the Lord for ages and ages. Amos told them that they were mistaken to want it. He prophesied that they would get a nasty surprise on that day. Instead of the exciting triumph they were expecting, they would find out how very different God's agenda was from theirs. The reason for this warning he gave was that Israel had not been faithful to the Lord. They did their religious thing, coming along to the synagogue meetings, bringing offerings and singing religious songs, but they neglected things God said were important.

V24 says "But let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream." So THIS is what God is interested in, according to Amos. Justice and righteousness. He compares them to a river and a vigorous stream which never runs dry. Righteousness is right standing with God and justice always flows from that. Amos warns us that God's perspective of what is important does not always match ours.

By the time we get to the last century BC, it was perfectly clear that left to themselves, the Hebrews were never going to straighten themselves out to God's way of thinking. If there were an alternative to God's way, as a nation they would take that wrong way. Then at just the right time, Father God sent Jesus to sort out the mess. As Jesus' time on earth drew to a close, he instructed his disciples about "that day" which was the normal Jewish way of describing the coming of the Messiah in power and judgment.

"At that time", he said, "the kingdom of heaven will be like 10 bridesmaids getting ready to greet the bridegroom." This story Jesus tells is based on the usual wedding customs of the day. The bride would be attended by group of unmarried girls. The custom was for the groom and his supporters to come to the bride's parents' house to take the bride away. Then the ceremony would be held and they would process to the feast. But *when* he would come – that was uncertain.

She would wait in expectancy on the day, until the cry was heard: "The bridegroom is coming!" Often it would be evening and the wedding party would process by torchlight – not an Eveready torch with 2 C batteries but a long pole which supported an oil container with a big cloth wick in it.

The point of the parable is: "Be ready for his coming." We might retell it as a mystery-themed wedding where the guests have to follow the bridegroom to a remote rural location for the wedding. There are ten bridesmaids in this sumptuous wedding party and they are travel in two cars. The five in one car filled the car with petrol before leaving. The other five did not. As they drove on and on, eventually the foolish bridesmaids were low on fuel and stopped the others to ask if they could siphon out some of their fuel. Since they did not know how much further they had to travel, they could not spare any and the foolish girls had to turn back for petrol. By the time they arrived they had missed the wedding.

It is about being ready. The main point is made at the end - you don't know when the Son of Man will come - so be ready. What is being ready? One clue to that question is found in verse 12 "I tell you the truth, I don't

know you.” When he says, “I tell you the truth” – that means “This is important - listen carefully and take note of this.” Listen up, guys! So let’s carefully examine the parable to see what the criteria are and what were the mistakes the foolish girls made. We don’t want to be found ignorant, as Paul says in our Epistle reading. As the girls are preparing, they all know that the timing of the bridegroom’s arrival is unknown. So it is with the second coming of Jesus.

We get given a few clues – the gospel will have been preached to all nations; there will be persecution and distress. Some persecution is happening right now - we heard about it in news from Kondo.

Such persecution is not new, but we need to be aware that there have been more Christian martyrs in the last century than all other centuries combined. As for every nation hearing the good news about Jesus, we probably won’t be aware at that time when the last nation gets to hear. There is no easy way to pinpoint when Jesus is coming again. So we must keep alert and watchful.

Back to the parable. The bridegroom was taking his time to get ready and to come. Everyone knew the timing of the groom’s coming was uncertain. Everyone was excited – we’re going to a wedding and there’ll be a feast! Waiting, Waiting. Everyone began to get drowsy and fall asleep - as you do when midnight is coming and there’s no action.

Then the shout rang out, “The bridegroom is coming!” Everyone woke up, but not everyone was prepared for the moment. What had been the problem with the 5 foolish girls? Had they just forgotten to look ahead? Had they presumed upon other people’s kindness or on the Lord’s kindness? Had they been skinflint, not wanting to spend their own money? They had enough money to run and buy oil at the end, why hadn’t they spent it before it was too late?

When the bridegroom came, those who were ready went with him, but the others were left out in the dark because they had been distracted from the main important thing. I am sure they had new clothes, freshly done hair, hungry tummies waiting for the feast, but they did not think ahead. Their outdoor torches would need to be topped up with oil every 15 minutes and they would lose their way without the necessary oil.

Jesus hammers the point home: “Keep watch. You do not know when I will come back.” It’s hard to keep awake when the night is dark and long. The 10 girls are not told off for feeling drowsy and going to sleep, but some are excluded because they did not prepare *before* getting drowsy in the long night.

What *is* the oil that keeps one’s torch going in the dark? Well, there is a clue in the words, “I tell you the truth: I don’t know you.” I don’t know you. These are chilling words, because of the finality of the closed door. And of the two words for “know” in Greek, this is the unexpected one for him to use. He says, “I don’t know you,” in the same way as he might say “I don’t know the price of oranges today.” The other word for “know” that he *could* have used means to know intimately – that’s not used here. It’s like the Lord is saying, “Were you even in the same room as I was? I had conversations with these other people; I know them well - but you? Did we ever even speak?”

So the bar is not set too high. Jesus is not saying, “Because we are not in an intimate relationship, you can’t come in.” He is saying, “We need to be acquainted before you can come in.” Without a torch in the ancient days, someone trying to get in without having a lighted torch might well be a thief or a brigand. Lit by the torch, the person would be recognisable.

The parable emphasises that there are some things we cannot borrow – we must have our own supply of oil. Oil is often used in the Bible as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Ephesians 5, “Keep on being filled with the Spirit...” There is always a first time to be filled, but we need to keep on being filled. Keep asking for more, keep pressing in. Yes, but how, Paul? He carries on to say, “Be careful how you live, not as unwise but as wise people, making the most of every opportunity. Do not get drunk on wine but be filled with the Spirit, singing praise songs to Christ and always give thanks to God for everything, in Jesus’ name.” He calls us to take care of the precious life God has given us, asking God to fill us up with His Spirit, gathering together as Christians to sing and praise and give thanks, honouring and respecting one another. As we meet together as the body of Christ, we will come to know Christ better and be known by him.

In only 8 weeks' time, in early January, we will have a prime opportunity as a church – and Paul urges us to make the most of every opportunity! The New Wine Christian conference is happening close by – in Warkworth. It is a wonderful opportunity to spend quality time together as a church, to hear international-quality teaching, to eat together and spend time together as a church. It works well as a church camp. Make the most of this opportunity as it has all the elements Paul speaks of in Ephesians which will help us to be topped up with the oil of the Holy Spirit and keep our lamps burning bright.

Jesus' message is like the scout motto: "Be Prepared". We are prepared when we make sure we would not be ashamed if our credit card balance were publicised. We are prepared when we have no grievances that need to be straightened out. We are prepared when we have started treating those around us with honour and respect. We are prepared when we fill up our heavenly bank balance as much as our earthly one. This is because much of the ethical behaviour encouraged in the New Testament is connected to our future life with Christ. Our life here on earth is not a dress rehearsal – it is the building blocks of our future with Christ.

As we consider the things of the life to come, it helps us to put our present life into perspective. The only things we can bring into heaven when we die are our relationship with God, our character and ultimately, the people whose lives we have influenced for Christ.

Today we have no idea of how the world is going in the far-flung corners. We do not know the depths of degradation happening in the dark corners of remote cities. We do not know when the Lord is going to say, "That's enough! Time to call a halt to the wickedness and finish this phase of The Plan. Time to wrap it all up."

I am so grateful that God did not decide to call a halt to the wickedness of the earth before I started to know him and be known by him. If God had not exercised patience and forbearance, I would have been lost.

I used to be afraid when I heard the parable of the sheep and goats where the Lord says to the goats, "Depart from me, for I never knew you." I was scared that that would be said to me at the last judgement. Nowadays, I know that even if I am not his most intimate friend, I am at least acquainted with the Lord. On that final day I want to be welcomed in to the party, not told to go away into the darkness.

It is so important to know Jesus and be known by him, to draw near to him and be filled with his Spirit. No-one wants to be on the outside of the door when it is closed. We want to be welcomed in with open arms of love, so we need to do as Amos warned us, to make sure that what God considers important is high priority in our lives. We find this out by reading the Bible.

One message of the parable is that there **will** come a time when it will be too late. Times like that are part of normal life. It's too late to prepare for an examination when it is about to start. It's too late to buy a present for your host when you are stepping in the door for his birthday party.

If anyone wants to talk about these important matters and make sure they are prepared for Jesus' return, you are welcome to come forward at the end of the service and talk to the prayer team or anyone on the leadership team.

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