

Who Is Responsible for My Oil?

November 8, 2020

Matthew 25: 1-13

¹ "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

⁹ But 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.' ¹⁰ And 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. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.



This morning we will look at the parable of the ten bridesmaids. In this passage Jesus tells the story of these bridesmaids – five deemed wise and five deemed foolish. Each is labeled as such based on the extra oil that they have brought with them. Some are prepared to wait long for the arrival of the bridegroom. Some are not. Last week we heard the call to rise up as servant leaders, to be prepared to witness to our faith, following Jesus' example.

The easy way to look at this parable, the comfortable way to look at this parable, would be to see it as a teaching on being ready in our faith. But this morning we will take a different approach. Today we will wrestle with this parable not so much as a judgment against unpreparedness but as a reflection of God's interaction with us and the natural consequences for failing to take personal responsibility for our faith. As we prepare to do so this morning, let us pray...

As we begin this morning, I invite you to consider, for a few seconds, the question posed in the title of today's message: Who is responsible for the oil in my lamp? This question is aimed at the idea that we each have faith "in the tank" so to speak. As most of you have probably experienced on your journeys of faith, the "level" of faith that we feel we have rises and falls. At times we feel like our faith is strong, like our tank is full. We feel ready to take on anything, able to conquer any mountain. But at other times we feel as if our faith is dry or without life, like our tank is empty. Often, when we are feeling empty, we desire to have a better or stronger faith. In those times, we feel like the image on the right. I believe that we spend most of our time someplace in between these two extremes – full and empty. So, again the question to begin with this morning is this: Who is responsible for my oil – for my faith?



The reality is that God entrusts us all with doing what we can to be a part of making disciples and building the kingdom of God. In that sense, we are the ones responsible for the oil in our lamps. Make no mistake, this is a choice.

When we do make the intentional choice to use the gifts and talents that God has blessed each of us with, we find joy and we feel that we have a purpose in this world. When living here, our cups are filled to overflowing when we are living to the fullest as we share our God-given abilities with the world around us.

Shift gears with me for a moment. Last week I shared about the benefits of my first job – learning responsibility, learning how to save and manage money. Today, I come to you from the other end of the spectrum. But first, a question: What was the shortest-lasting job you ever had? At the start of my junior year of college I took a job at one of the supermarkets in Storrs, Connecticut, home of the UConn Huskies. Whoo-hoo! On day one, I was shown how to stock shelves. To do this well, you had to line up the cans, all facing forward, with the correct brand behind the correct label. Yes, pretty tough job. After the trainer showed me how to do this task, he went on to other things. Pretty soon the manager hollers at the trainer about sticking by that dumb kid, stating that he didn't want to have to clean up after him. I thought, really? How rude and disrespectful! I only worked there one day. I knew enough from my previous jobs that this was not a place for me. Working there would be draining, not filling. There were better ways and places to earn money for college. For me, it would have been irresponsible to continue in that environment.



In our passage for today, from Matthew 25, we hear the parable of the bridesmaids. A quick synopsis as we turn to this passage in our Bibles here at church or at home.

Jesus begins by stating that *"the kingdom of heaven will be like this"*. This parable has application on two levels. There are ten bridesmaids who took their lamps to wait upon the arrival of the bridegroom. We are the bridesmaids; Jesus is the groom. We await his return. There are five foolish bridesmaids and there are five wise bridesmaids. The five are foolish because they did not take extra oil along with their lamps. Time passes, the bridegroom is delayed, the night wears on. For us, Jesus has not returned, times pass by, faith wanes. The bridesmaids become drowsy and they fall asleep. Jesus still hasn't returned, faith goes on cruise control, faith becomes complacent, faith is put on the back burner. At midnight, an alarm is sounded! A job is unexpectedly lost, a disease comes out of nowhere, a loved one leaves us suddenly. We are thrown into a state of confusion. Quick! The bridegroom is approaching, light your lamps, prepare to receive him. The foolish beg for some oil from the wise bridesmaids. Now, the bridegroom is not actually there yet – there may yet be some delay. Yet the wise refuse to share their remaining oil with the foolish bridesmaids.

When we find ourselves in a struggle or challenge or time of trial, we cannot suddenly then wish that we had more faith. Nor can we instantly give another faith if they are the ones having a difficult time. We, like the wise bridesmaids, must be prepared – always with our faith ready to be drawn upon. In this sense, we are the only ones responsible for our own oil. During those times when we need to lean into our faith, we must also remember that Jesus Christ equips us to take responsibility for our choices and to find creative solutions for our challenges. In and through faith, we are equipped and empowered to respond well in difficult times.

Now, about these wise bridesmaids – are they selfish? Perhaps. Could have they been more understanding of the needs of the foolish ones? Yes, but were the foolish ones really helpless? Instead of sleeping, could have they gone and gotten more oil? Would have helping them actually been harmful? And how do we feel about God when we have been the foolish bridesmaid? How do we feel when we have been the ones to not have enough oil in the lamp, enough faith in our God? Do we ever get mad at God for not fixing things, for not intervening, for not giving us what we want? Yes, we have been the foolish ones at times. These are tough questions for us to consider, to weigh in our hearts and minds.

When dealing with issues of need or with the impacts of poverty, there is big difference between offering a hand-out and a hand up. Sometimes simply meeting a need without addressing the underlying factors or decisions or conditions is more harmful than not helping. We can create dependence issues very easily. But to offer a hand up requires much more of an investment of our time. The old adage, *"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime"* is applicable here. It is easier to just give someone \$5 than to engage them and spend time with them. Because of this, I can struggle to engage the other when offering a hand up is the better choice. This is because I often do not understand the choices made or the decisions that led to the person being in need. I must be careful not to condemn choices or decisions that I do not fully understand.

Like all people of faith, the wise bridesmaids were on a journey. They had a destination, a goal in mind. They had done what was necessary to be able to

continue their journey. The bridegroom, Jesus, arrived and they were ushered into the wedding banquet. In our faith lives, do we live with such readiness, prepared always to take the next step of faith? In the here and now, when the Holy Spirit nudges us or when God provides an opportunity to witness to our faith, are we prepared to take that next step? Last week, if you were in church, you were given a tool to help you take a step on the road to making disciples. Did you use this tool to engage a neighbor or coworker or classmate? Or is the bag of candy still at home on the kitchen counter?

In our parable, the foolish bridesmaids were present, but they are not really prepared. We remember, while they were away finding oil for their lamps, the bridegroom arrived. The five foolish bridesmaids were left on the outside looking in. In verse twelve the bridegroom says to them, *"Truly I tell you I do not know you"*. The door had been shut and they were left standing outside the wedding banquet. I wonder if that is how I sometimes make people feel when I do not help them when they ask for assistance or when I pass them by instead of stopping to talk with and engage them when I'm out in the world. I know the reality is that I or we cannot help everyone, but there is a time and place when and where we need to be responsive to the needs of the world. While it is true that I or we cannot help everyone, it is also equally true that we cannot choose to help no one. As Christians, our call is to humble service. In answering that call, we are better together. If we were to take turns keeping watch, manning the front, seeking to make a difference when and where we can, won't we all have oil left when the expected one arrives?



During this pandemic time, many people are feeling anxiety and stress. Much as is evident in this picture depicting a scene from our parable, people are feeling anxious and stressed about not being able to do the things that they normally do. Others are feeling anxious or stressed by their inability to be with the ones that they love. Some are worried about having enough – will the decreased hours at work still cover the bills? Will what we had saved up get us through until we can find work again? Will I get to see my aging or ill parent again? For some at home this morning – when will we be able to worship together again? When will it be safe to return to those normal activities? As believers who trust in God's power and love, we can be present to those who are stressed or anxious. It may be over the phone, via a text or note or card, or it could be in person – depending on the circumstances. As ones seeking to be light and love in the world, we must be active and alert, noticing and then responding when someone needs a kind word or some assurance in these uneasy times. When we are all working together, making a concerted effort as a community of faith, then we are able to accomplish more, to affect more lives, to be a greater light in the community. Being a community also helps each part to not do too much.



To find the proper balance, we must ask ourselves: do we take responsibility when and where we can? Or do we hope that someone else will step up and do what we would rather not do? Or... do we allow others to do things for us that we could do ourselves? God will let us know when we have made a choice that we should not have or when we have failed to act when we should have.

The Holy Spirit is quick to convict us when we pass by a person in need or when we choose not to help someone that we could have and should have helped. Most often, at least for me, that conviction and wrestling with my failure to be a humble servant leader has worked to lay the groundwork for responding as I should when presented with a similar scenario the next time.



Part of the parable of the ten bridesmaids is theological in nature. As we draw to a close this morning, we turn to that aspect of Jesus' teaching. To that end, we must

each ask ourselves, are we prepared, in the eternal sense? Part of the implications for this parable are that Jesus is the groom and we are the bridesmaids. The question to ponder is: will we be ready or are we ready for when we meet Christ? Connecting to last week's message, how many of us wear a "mask" of some type, pretending to be a Christian – wearing a large phylactery box or sporting a nice big cross around our neck to appear ready, when in reality we are not. So, in this sense, today's parable is also a personal call to be ready to receive the gift that is yet to come. Whether Jesus returns in our lifetime or whether we are called home before his return, at that moment, the door will open for those prepared to enter the heavenly wedding banquet, to receive the gift of eternal life. In that moment, the bridegroom will invite us in. The parable of the bridesmaids calls us to be ready. May it ever be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When your 'tank' is feeling empty or dry, what is your best way to replenish your faith? When others are empty or dry, how can you help to replenish their faith?
- 2) *Pray*. We all know people in our lives – family, friends, neighbors, coworkers – who are struggling with their faith. Pray for them!!
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 24: 36-51. Over what has God given you stewardship? How would God evaluate the job you're doing?