

**“When the Bridegroom Is Delayed” – Matthew 25:1-13 – November 12, 2017**  
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Our New Testament lesson from Matthew’s gospel is a parable about Ten Bridesmaids. Jesus is telling his disciples about what the kingdom of God will be like at the end of days. He tells a parable about 10 bridesmaids who are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive for a wedding so the festivities can begin. Five of them are foolish, the other five are wise. All ten bridesmaids have their oil lamps with them, but the five who are called wise have each brought an additional flask of oil.

The bridegroom has been delayed. The bridesmaids wait outside the banquet hall. And wait, and wait, and wait. Finally, exhaustion takes over and they all fall asleep. But eventually at midnight they hear a shout that the bridegroom is on the way. They all wake up and trim their lamps, but the maids who are called foolish are running out of oil. They were not prepared for the possibility of the groom being delayed. They ask the wise maids to give them oil from the flasks that they had brought with them. But the wise ones tell them no, and send them out into the night to buy oil. So, the foolish maids hurry out to purchase oil.

Meanwhile, the groom arrives and welcomes the five wise bridesmaids into the banquet hall. When the foolish bridesmaids return, the party has already started, and the door is closed. They knock on the door and ask to be let in, but the groom says to them, “I never knew you.”

This is a troubling parable, because it doesn’t seem very fair. It seems to reward the hoarding of goods. What happened to the concept of sharing that we learned way back in kindergarten? Why didn’t the wise bridesmaids share the oil with the foolish ones so that they could all enter the banquet hall together? Or what about the idea of grace? When the foolish ones showed up later in the evening, why did the groom forbid them from coming inside?

We aren’t given many details in this parable. But the one element that sticks out is the oil. The oil is key to understanding the message. The wise ones brought extra oil. The foolish ones relied only on the oil already in their lamps. The groom was late. And so the women who had prepared themselves for the possibility of his delay are considered to be wise and they get to go to the banquet. They are rewarded. The foolish women who had no extra oil are punished. Since this parable is allegorical in nature, we assume that the oil is a metaphor for something.

Still there is the question, why didn’t the wise women share the oil? Sharing resources with others is definitely a part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sharing is good thing, being stingy is not. Jesus certainly preached about sharing your stuff with others. So why in this parable does he seem to reward stinginess? In light of what we know about Jesus and understand

about his gospel, the only possible answer is that the oil must represent something that cannot be shared.

When Matthew wrote this gospel for his church, there was still confusion about when Jesus would come again and bring with him the kingdom of God. Remember, the early church really thought that Jesus would be back very soon, but for some reason, like the groom in the parable, Jesus was delayed. So, the question for those early Christians was, what do we do now? What do we do in the meantime? Some people were growing weary of waiting. Some lost their initial enthusiasm that they had when they first became followers of Christ. Some began to drift away and return to their old lives and their old habits. Their faith was weak, and they didn't have the staying power to continue on. They were the foolish bridesmaids. They had fuel in their lamps for a little while, but when that fuel ran out, they had nothing.

The wise bridesmaids are those who are prepared for the delay of the groom. They represent the Christians who are ready for Christ no matter when he comes. They have the fuel to sustain themselves throughout the delay.

What is this fuel? It is not something that we can get from anyone else, nor can we give it to someone else. It is something inside of us, something that sustains us in our journey of faith. We add or diminish this fuel based on how we live our lives. When we serve God, we add to our fuel supply. When we focus on ourselves or choose to follow the ways of the world, we decrease our fuel supply.

This isn't about accomplishing enough good deeds to earn our way into the wedding banquet. Only God's grace can do that. This parable is a parable about preparedness. Are we refueling ourselves on a regular basis so that we can be ready for whatever comes our way? The future really is uncertain. We live each day according to routines and schedules. For the most part, our habits get us through. But at some point, we will be stopped cold. Something will come up that catches us unaware. We won't time to run out and look for oil merchants in the middle of the night. And so the question becomes, Will we have enough fuel within us to carry us through? Will we be sustained through the tough times? And alternatively, when Christ comes, will we be ready for the banquet to begin?

The choices we make in our lives reveal who or what we serve. Do we serve ourselves putting our needs before all others? Do we serve the false gods of our society such as consumerism and materialism? Do we set other people upon pedestals and allow them to control and dictate our life? Or do we serve God?

The things we do in our lives all effect the store of fuel each of us carries with us. We encounter so many opportunities to add to or delete our fuel stores. Will we help others who are struggling, showing kindness and mercy? Will we speak out for those who are stuck in

the margins, without a voice? Will we surround ourselves with people who nurture and encourage our growth? Will we spend time in prayer and devotion? Will we make decisions based on the Big Picture, instead of simply what is beneficial to us? Will we come to church and worship God and enjoy fellowship within community? Will we use our talents and resources to support the church and charitable organizations?

Each choice, each decision either adds fuel or subtracts it. We don't know what the future holds, and Matthew's parable tells us to always be ready, to have enough fuel for the unexpected moments. We can't buy this fuel or receive it from someone else. It comes from within us, a store of fuel based on a lifetime of choices. How do we replenish this fuel? By following God and putting God first in our lives.