READY FOR HIS COMING

Matthew 25:1–30

Key Verse: 25:21

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”

 “Are you ready?” What does it mean? “Ready” can mean being prepared, but it also can mean being willing and eager to do something. Its opposite can mean being slow, dull, or even discouraged. Jesus just told his disciples: “So you also must be *ready* [italics added], because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:44). He promised he’ll come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night (24:43; cf. 1Th5:2; 2Pe3:10a). He gave the parable of the faithful and wise servant who’s doing what his master wants until he returns (24:45–47). Now in chapter 25 Jesus continues his teaching about being ready. There are many important elements in living as a disciple of Jesus—learning Jesus’ gentle, humble heart (11:29), learning Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness (9:13; 12:7; 18:32–35), learning Jesus’ great faith in our Great God (6:30; 8:10,26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; 21:21). But being his disciple, we also need to learn how to be ready for his Second Coming at any time—eagerly and willingly waiting to meet him. In today’s passage we’ll study the first two parables in chapter 25, the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the bags of gold. Next week we’ll study perhaps the most heart-moving one, the parable of the sheep and the goats. Ten virgins. Men with bags of gold. Jesus is using some vivid imagery to catch our attention, tell us some surprising stories, and drive home his points. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

 Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins was famous in history. People made drawings and paintings and statues and wrote plays about it. Many women could relate to it. But the interpretations were not always based on good Bible study. Some pseudo-Gnostics compared the five foolish virgins to five bodily senses, and the five wise ones to five virtues. Some used it to teach women to become nuns and live in absolute chastity. But most have understood this parable to be about being ready for Jesus’ Second Coming. What does it really say?

 Read verses 1–5. Here, the key figure is actually not the ten virgins but the bridegroom. The bridegroom represents Jesus. Jesus taught earlier in 9:15 that he’s the bridegroom. Why did Jesus compare himself to a bridegroom? It was to tell us that his coming will be so joyful, like a handsome bridegroom coming to meet his bride. The Bible repeatedly tells us that Jesus is our bridegroom and the church of believers is his bride (Mk2:19; Lk5:34; Jn3:29; Ro7:4; 2Co11:2,3; Eph5:23–27,32; Rev19:7; 21:2,9; 22:17a). Like a bride and bridegroom, Christians are those who have an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus. And in the Bible, his kingdom is described as a wedding supper (Rev19:7,9)—the utmost blessing (Lk14:15), something we really look forward to enjoying.

 In Jesus’ parable, the ten virgins are like modern-day bridesmaids; they too are looking forward to enjoying the wedding banquet of the bride and groom. In those days, the groom and groomsmen would travel to the bride’s house at night, where they would have the wedding ceremony, and then the men would take the bride and bridesmaids through the streets at night carrying torches and go to the groom’s house, where they would have the wedding banquet at night, and sometimes, the party would last for ten days! Of course, the bridesmaids felt so happy to be part of this, and they would get themselves all beautiful for it.

 But in Jesus’ parable, he makes a distinction: five of these women are foolish, and five are wise. They all go out to meet the bridegroom and his party, but only five of them take extra oil to be ready to wait in the night until he comes. So what does it mean to be “wise”? In this case, it means not to be extra smart, but simply, to have good judgment or common sense in practical matters. Women are known to be really good at this, because they often have had to manage all the practical affairs of a household. As we’ve seen, Jesus has already told a story about a faithful and wise servant (24:45). Earlier, he told a parable about being a wise or a foolish builder (7:24–27). In every case, being wise means thinking ahead, all the way to the ultimate outcome. To be spiritually wise means to believe in Jesus’ Second Coming and live as if I really believe it.

 Look at verses 3,4 again. The foolish virgins just went out with their lamps but with no extra oil. Maybe they just got excited and emotional and were in a hurry. But the wise virgins took oil in jars along with their lamps. Why? They thought ahead, that the bridegroom might not come right away, and they wanted to be ready for him. What happened? Read verse 5. The wise virgins were right—the bridegroom was a long time in coming, so long that they all fell asleep. Jesus repeatedly says to “keep watch” for his Second Coming (24:42; 25:13). And the Bible repeatedly warns us not to fall into spiritual slumber (Ro13:11; 1Co11:30; 1Th5:6). But in this case, the wise virgins also fell asleep, so the sleeping itself at this point doesn’t seem to have been a sin.

 The real story begins in verse 6. Read verses 6–9. Here’s where the wise and foolish virgins look different. The wise ones have oil to get their lamps burning brightly again, but the foolish ones don’t. In fact, they try to depend on the wise ones to borrow oil from them, but they are denied. It depicts the suddenness of Jesus’ Second Coming. Either we’ll be ready at that moment, or we won’t. And we won’t be able to depend on others. What happens? Read verse 10. The wise virgins who were ready got to go into wedding banquet with the bridegroom. It’s an allegory for being ready to meet Jesus and enter his kingdom. The foolish virgins who weren’t ready were out somewhere desperately trying to buy extra oil at the last minute. But it didn’t work. The verse says, “And the door was shut.” It means that when Jesus comes, those who aren’t ready won’t be given a second chance; they won’t be able to get into his kingdom.

 Jesus saves the end of the parable to make his main point. Read verses 11,12. It’s one of those stunning moments. It’s hard to believe the bridegroom would be so mean not to let those virgins into his wedding banquet. Where’s the mercy? But Jesus is using hyperbole to drive home an important truth. What’s he trying to say? The main problem is that these virgins didn’t really know him. Earlier Jesus described false disciples as those who say, “Lord, Lord,” but don’t really know him (7:21–23; cf. Lk13:25–27). Matthew’s Gospel repeatedly tells us that in the church there are two kinds of people, good and bad, true and false, wise and foolish, ready and not ready (7:24–27; 13:24–30,36–43; 24:40,41,45–51). The point is, we can’t just be among other Christians and think we’ll be okay. We need to know Jesus personally. This seems to be related to bringing the extra oil. Knowing the bridegroom personally, like taking the extra oil, is the ticket to get in to the wedding banquet. It tells us that knowing Jesus personally enables us to persevere, to wait for his coming with patient faith, and to be ready for him, even if we’ve fallen asleep.

 So how can we have a personal relationship with Jesus? We need to receive his love and grace personally. We need to know that we’re a sinner, and accept his grace of forgiveness. Based on this grace, we love him in return. In this parable it seems the wise virgins really loved the bridegroom, and that’s why they wanted to be ready for him. Likewise, spiritual readiness comes from loving Jesus with an undying love (1Co16:22; Eph6:24). It’s the “extra oil,” the wisest thing we can do in life. It’s what makes us spiritually ready at any time: love for Jesus. We should never let this love burn out or grow lukewarm or cold; love for Jesus should always be sincere and earnest (2Co8:8; Rev2:4; 3:16). Read verse 13. Here, to “keep watch” can mean to eagerly look for Jesus’ Second Coming, but it also can mean to keep watch over ourselves, that our hearts don’t get stolen away from loving him.

 Jesus’ second parable today, the parable of the bags of gold, has also been misunderstood. First of all, the Greek word for “bags of gold” here traditionally has been translated into English as “talent.” In Jesus’ day it meant a specific about of wealth, as did the denarius or the mina. A denarius was worth a day’s wages; a mina was worth about three months’ wages; but a talent was actually worthy about 20 years’ wages. In modern terms, based on a minimum wage of $15/hour, that would be about half a million dollars. Five talents would be $2.5 million; two talents would be $1 million. So it’s a much larger amount of money than the expression “bags of gold” would suggest. In Greek, this word is literally “talenta,” and it means the scale of a balance where coins are weighed. For Jews, a talent of silver weighed about 100 pounds, and a talent of gold weighed 200 pounds—quite a heavy bag. The parable of the talents became so famous in the English-speaking world that the word “talent” came to mean human abilities. But it’s really a symbol of all the resources God gives us personally, including life itself, health, talents, material possessions, opportunities, and other people in our lives. Some people have used this parable to justify being aggressive capitalists who squeeze double profits out of any business or people as a means of pleasing God. But what did Jesus really mean by this parable?

 Read verses 14,15. Here again, the prominent feature is not the servants but the man going on a journey. He’s depicted as a very rich man, who has around $4 million in liquid assets alone! Wow! Because he has to go on a long trip, he won’t be able to do any business, so he entrusts his wealth to his servants. He also knows his servants well, how able or not able they are, and distributes his wealth to them based on their abilities. Not only does he want to maximize his profits, but also he wants his servants to be successful. He doesn’t want them to get overwhelmed with the amount of money he gives them. It tells us that God entrusts each of us with just the right amount of resources. The real question is not how much resources God gives us, but what we do with them.

 What happens? Read verses 16,17. These first two servants go out “at once,” it says. It shows how eager and willing they are to put their master’s money to work for him. Without him being physically present, watching over or pushing them, they’re working for him anyway. Why are they working like this for their master? It’s because they’re *loyal* to him! They’re not trying to make great gains for *themselves*; they’re trying to make gains for their *master*. In fact, they *love* their master. Then there’s the third servant. Read verse 18. He seems to be quite curious. He hides the money buried in the ground. Later we find out why.

 What happens next? Read verse 19. Again, we see that the return of the important figure happens “after a long time.” It may have seemed like he wasn’t coming back, but he did. It says he came to “settle accounts” with his servants. It means he wants to see what each one did with his money. It’s an allegory of when Jesus comes again. Earlier, Jesus promised that at his Second Coming, he’s going to reward each person according to what they have done (16:27). And elsewhere, the Bible repeatedly warns us about this (Ro2:6; 1Co3:8; 2Co5:10; Eph6:8; Rev2:23; 22:12). To be ready for his coming, we need to live with this end in view, that our Lord Jesus is going to reward each person according to what they have done. In his Gospel Matthew emphasizes grace, but he also emphasizes practical Christian living, actually *doing* what Jesus wants.

 What does the first servant say? Look at verse 20. What a happy guy! Was it easy to double the money his master gave him? Certainly not! It’s never easy to turn $2.5 million into $5 million. But he did it! He must have worked so hard, each and every day while his master was gone, using all his heart and soul and mind, to make that much money. It’s an allegory for obeying and serving our Lord Jesus out of genuine love and loyalty to him (22:37). This is how we can live each day ready for his Second Coming. It emphasizes that being ready is not just about the last moment when we encounter him; it’s about how we live each day. Each day we should be working for our Master Jesus, doing our best to please and honor and glorify him in all we do.

 How does the master respond to this servant? Read verse 21. It’s startling that the master says he’s been put in charge of “a few things” when he was actually given $2.5 million! But with this expression he’s contrasting life on earth with life in his kingdom. Life in his kingdom is far greater than any earthly accomplishment or achievement. Even more, we notice in verse 21 how pleased the master is. He calls this man “good and faithful.” He tells him, “Well done!” He promises to put him in charge of many things. And at last he says, “Come and share your master’s happiness!” What a reward! He didn’t say: I’ll share the profit with you 50/50. He simply said, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share your master’s happiness!” This was way better. It was to enjoy the favor of his master and the joy of his master. It wasn’t a business relationship; it was a love relationship. The servant loved the master, and vice versa.

 What about the second servant? Read verses 22,23. This shows us that the master wasn’t so interested in the amount of profit; he was more interested in the love and loyalty of his servants. So he gave this second servant the same reward as the first one. God isn’t looking for amounts of good deeds or fruits from our lives; he’s looking for genuine love for him. He’s also looking for faithfulness with what he entrusts to us. To both servants he praised their faithfulness. Earlier Jesus also mentioned a “faithful and wise” servant (24:45). To be ready for his coming, he’s not pressuring us to perform; he’s just looking for faithfulness.

 How does the third servant explain himself? Read verses 24,25. This man is crooked towards his master. He’s figured out he won’t get any of the profits. He doesn’t like it that his master seems so tough. His words show he doesn’t want to serve his master or have anything to do with him. So he just buries the money and gives it back to him. Probably he thinks he did such a good job, not dipping into any of that money to spend on himself. Perhaps that is admirable.

 But what does the master say? Read verses 26,27. He was wicked and lazy because he was too smart for his own good. He wasn’t interested at all in bringing any profit to his master, so he never even thought about depositing the money in the bank in order to draw interest on it. What did the master do? Read verses 28–30. Again, God is fair. And it isn’t about the money; it’s about the relationship. God isn’t comparing us with others; he just wants us to love and serve him instead of loving and serving ourselves.

 Today we learned how to be ready for Jesus’ Second Coming. We need to grow in a deep personal love relationship with him. And we need to be doing our best to please and serve him in our daily lives. When we’re loving and serving him from our hearts each day, we’re ready at any time for him to come back.