

The Ten Bridesmaids

Matt. 25:1-13

Jesus' story of the 10 bridesmaids is unexpected in respect to the setting that Jesus describes. If we have a wedding today, the groom picks his best man and his groomsmen. The bride picks her maid of honor and her bridesmaids. The bridesmaids are the friends of the bride and sometimes the bridesmaids will have not even met the groom. They correspond to the bride rather than to the groom. In Jesus' day this was still true. Bridesmaids would be the friends or relatives of the bride rather than of the groom. Jesus makes no mention of a bride in His story and the bridesmaids are seen waiting for the groom to come and let them into the wedding feast. From either a modern or ancient perspective, the scene is unusual. Obviously, this was a deliberate device used by Jesus to make the point that He intended. It could be that he wanted to get His listeners off balance so that they would pay attention rather than filling in the story with assumptions that would cause them (and us) to miss the message.

Jesus had just told another story in which the evil servant was guilty of taking advantage of the expectation that his master's return would be delayed. Since his return was a long way off, the servant decided to "let the place go" since he had plenty of time to fix things when his master's arrival was more imminent. But, the choice made to put off responsibilities was never reversed and his master returned at a time when he was not ready. The evil servant's mistake was his assumption that his master's return would continue to be delayed. His master returned sooner than he thought and so he was caught unprepared. Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids describes the opposite problem. The five foolish bridesmaids are so described because they were not prepared for the bridegroom's coming to be delayed. If he had come as soon as they expected then they would not have needed to bring a container of oil, what they had in their lamps would have sufficed. The bridegroom came later than they thought and so they were caught unprepared. In either case, whether Jesus comes sooner

or later than expected, if the consequence of the expectation is unpreparedness then the consequence is tragic.

A high expectation of Jesus' soon return can be confusing and lead to foolish errors. In my home church that I grew up in back in the 70's there was the kind of high expectation of Jesus' soon return that we have been describing. As we have noted, they erroneously thought that the prophetic clock was ticking based on the re-establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. I can remember the church's finances being discussed in view of Christ's soon return. It was thought that the best position to be in would be to be manageably in debt. You shouldn't be too extremely in debt because no one knows the day or the hour but you also would not want to have tons of money in your savings accounts because at the moment of His return it would be wasted and you would have missed the opportunity to spend the money for the benefit of the kingdom. Jesus did not return as soon as the church expected and the church's financial problems led to its demise. This was not the only issue but philosophically, the church's unpreparedness for the delay of Jesus' coming was a factor.

In another even more extreme case I had a preacher friend who was extremely overweight. He was tall as well as broad but he must have weighed over 400 pounds. So, I invited 3 preacher friends to come to our church and had each preach on a different aspect of Bible prophecy. In this friend's particular sermon he stated that his expectation that Jesus was coming soon was the reason why he was not trying to diet and lose weight. He said, "If I dieted and lost weight to the point that I should and then Jesus came, I would have lost it all for nothing." He was looking at the diet as something that he would do for his health in order to live longer, but if Jesus came this would then (to him) have been an unnecessary sacrifice. Again, it was a delay in Jesus' coming that he was not prepared for and that lack of preparation may again have had tragic consequences.

The story of the bridesmaids could also remind you of the flood. In the flood, when God shut the door of the ark it could not be opened. In Jesus' story, the bridegroom shut the door to the feast and then would not open it. For those outside these shut doors it was too late. There was no remedy for the mistakes

that had left them outside of these shut doors. The shut door is a judgment. What had been open is now closed and there is no going back. There are doors that may close in our lives. A person who has trouble getting to work on time may eventually get fired for habitual tardiness. Once you have been fired from a job, that particular door of employment closes. Your life is not over and there are other places to work where you can try again but you can never know what your life would have looked like if you had not been fired at that particular time. If you believe that a believer should seek marriage with another believer (a principle taught by the Apostle Paul) but you grow tired of waiting for this to happen for you and so you become involved with someone who is not a believer and you marry the unbeliever then a door has closed, you will never know what your life might have been had you waited for God to bring that believing spouse into your life. The point is that doors do close and once closed, they cannot be opened. Jesus' story accurately portrays this reality.

But let's get back into the story. The foolish bridesmaids who were not prepared for the bridegroom to delay his coming woke up and found that their lamps were out of oil. They asked the wise bridesmaids who came with extra oil just in case it was needed, if they would share with them and the wise bridesmaids refused to share. They said that then they would all run out and there would be no one ready when the bridegroom came. The foolish girls ran off to get more oil and when they were gone the bridegroom came and they were left out behind the door which now was locked. They could not understand when the bridegroom refused to let them in. What they did not see was that it was not about them but about the bride and groom. Honoring the special couple meant taking steps to be ready whether the bridegroom came early or late.

Spiritualizers of the story have the oil representing obedience to Christ's commands. This pictures faith that produces good works as opposed to a shallow kind of belief that claims Christ without making the commitment to follow Him. Paul and James say the same thing but in different ways. Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we

should walk in them." James writes, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works, can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled', but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

So Jesus has offered two images of what it looks like to be ready. the wise servant who is ready does not assume that his master will delay his return and industriously does all that he can every day to be prepared. The wise bridesmaid does not assume that the bridegroom will come immediately and is prepared for his coming whether it is immediate or even if it is delayed. They honor the bridegroom with their readiness and are welcomed into the feast.