

A Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year  
Matthew 25:1–13  
by Peter Bockoven

As you may remember, in the 1950s, our country had students in school perform exercises, or drills, to be prepared for a potential nuclear war between the former Soviet Union and our United States. The government authorities viewed a nuclear war as a real threat. They didn't want anyone caught by surprise.

We know it's so important to prepare. We prepare for big events, like starting a new job, attending a new school, moving to a new city. And some things we prepare for might never happen to us, such as escaping from a burning building, or an armed man. But it's still important to prepare for them.

And we Christians prepare not only for things in this present world, but also for things in the world to come.

This is the topic of our gospel lesson. For as we'll see, it's a lesson about Christ, his return to judgment, and the fact that some people are ready to receive him, and some are not. It's a lesson that reminds that *we prepare for Christ's kingdom*. It shows us *why* we prepare; *how* we prepare; and *for what purpose or goal* we prepare.

The parable begins with Jesus speaking of "the kingdom of heaven." And that phrase simply means Christ's presence. In the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, for example we hear of John the baptist preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." And he was speaking about Christ.

And Christ is present in different ways. He was present during his ministry. He's present in his church now. And he'll be present again when he returns at the end of the world. And this is what the parable is speaking of. This is what Jesus has been explaining to his disciples since Matthew 24. When Christ finally comes back, the fullness of kingdom, and the fullness of his presence, will arrive.

We say that the fullness of his kingdom hasn't arrived yet, because, although he is present on earth, as we read his word, and receive him in the Sacraments, evil still fights against good, darkness still fights against light, sin still fights against righteousness in the world, even though the battle is already won by Christ. But when he comes back this will all pass away.

So we have a story of virgins waiting for a bridegroom and a wedding feast. It's appropriate, I think, to mention ancient Jewish wedding practices. When a Jewish man would propose to a woman, they were basically considered married. (That's why, for example, we hear that Joseph, when he heard that Mary was pregnant, considered divorcing her quietly.) But the couple wouldn't yet live together. Instead, the groom would go away, and prepare a home for his bride. And when all things were ready, he would march to his bride's home, with his friends, in a joyful procession, where she

would be waiting with her friends (the virgins in our text). And when the bridegroom arrived, all of them would celebrate, as bride and groom walked to their new home.

So we have virgins waiting for a bridegroom. The virgins signify the church. The bridegroom signifies Christ.

Here we see why we prepare for Christ's kingdom. Because we're the church. We've been persuaded by God's Spirit that Jesus is the Lord. And Jesus has told us plainly, in his word, that he's going to come back to judge the world. A little later in this same chapter, Christ says:

**When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne ... (Matthew 25:31).**

Christ is coming back. But we don't know when this will happen. Listen to the words of Paul, in our epistle:

**You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3).**

We are the church. Christ's body. We've been taught by Christ, and we believe what he says: he is coming back. That's why we get prepare.

But how do you and I prepare? This event is so beyond our comprehension or imagination. It's far more important than anything else in life. And yet it feels at times so distant, so far off, so mysterious. How can we prepare? For that we look at the virgins.

There were two kinds of virgins: the wise and the foolish, or the prepared and the unprepared. Both had their lamps, but only one group had oil to light the lamp, whenever the bridegroom would arrive. One group was ready to follow, the other was not.

This shows that in the world there are two kinds of people. The foolish and the wise. We need to have our lamp and oil ready to follow Christ when he comes. It isn't enough to simply have a lamp without anything to light it.

Now the well-lit lamp is faith. It's by faith that we're joined to Christ, receive his gifts, and follow him. And the oil is the gospel, or the grace of Christ, the promise that all who believe in Christ have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Not by works, but as a gift. This promise creates faith in our heart to follow Christ. And the empty lamp, without oil, is outward participation in the church, or a moral, godly-looking life, without faith in Christ. It's the appearance of a life with Christ without the substance of it. This is what Paul wrote about, when he says to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:5):

**[In the last days there will come people who have] the appearance of godliness, but deny its power.**

So not all who are outwardly godly are prepared to follow Jesus when he returns. This was true when Christ first came. And that's why he gives the disciples this parable here, before his death. Jesus was approaching the climax of his life and ministry, his crucifixion for our sins. And yet, not all people were prepared to receive the death of Christ, his first coming. Not all received him, but rejected him.

Such were the Pharisees. They were zealous for God's laws, for the temple-worship at Jerusalem, they knew that the Christ was going to come. They were descendants of Abraham. And yet when they saw promised seed of Abraham, they were not prepared. And therefore Jesus dealt harshly with them, saying words like this, as we see earlier in Matthew's gospel (23:13):

**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.**

But with Christ's disciples, with the poor sinners—prostitutes and tax collectors—who acknowledged their need, and that Christ could save and help them; to them Christ was merciful, and gentle, forgiving their sins, and inviting them to joyful participation in his kingdom. And here, he warns them, not to be like the Pharisees.

So: how do we prepare? How do we not be foolish, but wise? For that, let's jump to the end of the lesson, verse 13.

**Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**

Watch, Christ says. Keep your eyes open. Look out for my coming. Get out your calendar, and write this: "Christ might come back today."

This word, "watch," is really, I think, a summary of what it means to prepare for Christ's coming. And I think it's appropriate, in order to understand what we must do, to look at how Christ, and his cousin, John the Baptist, told people to prepare for Jesus' first coming. What was their preaching? "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Behold, the lamb of God! And be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins."

The first preaching for Christ's first coming shows us that preparation for Christ does not ultimately depend upon our work or effort. Think, for example, of another time when Christ used this word, "watch," in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is preparing for his death, praying in agony, and his disciples fall asleep. "Watch" he says. "Stay awake with me."

So watching with Christ, being prepared for his coming, is something that he works in us, by coming to us through his word and sacraments.

So we've seen why we prepare. We're the church of Christ, and he will come back soon. We've seen how we prepare, by repentance and faith, clinging to Christ in the Means of Grace. But for what purpose do we prepare? What is our goal? For that we turn to the ending of the parable.

So the virgins fall asleep while waiting for the bridegroom. This is a reference to physical death. Christ hasn't come back yet, and his faithful fall asleep in death as they wait for him. But a cry goes out at midnight, announcing the arrival of the bridegroom. This corresponds to the angels, that will announce Christ's final coming. The virgins wake up. This is the resurrection from the dead. And the foolish virgins ask for oil. We see their regret for not having prepared. But the wise respond that they can't share their oil. So nobody else's faith can count for our own. Then they go out to buy oil. And meanwhile, the bridegroom takes the wise virgins into the wedding feast, and shuts the door. The foolish virgins come back, ask to enter in, but the bridegroom responds that he does not know them.

So we prepare that the door might not be closed to us. The sorrow that we would have, if that were to happen to us, would be indescribable.

But we also prepare, in light of the gracious promises, seen in how the bridegroom takes the wise virgins into the wedding feast. Here we see Christ's will for you and for me. Here we see his character and his person. Here we see what he is happy to do for us all, and where he all wants us to live.

Think of the best wedding that you've ever attended. Think, maybe, of royal weddings. They are such happy, they are such joyful events. And Jesus our Lord shows us, that *that* is what eternal life will be like, That *that* is the life that he wants us to have. A life filled with love. With celebration. With peace and happiness. And we obtain all of these things, by life with God, and with all Christians and angels in heaven. That's the goal of our preparation: to enter into eternal life at the resurrection.

Jesus, our loving bridegroom and Savior, is pleased to give us all that life. Though the thought of him saying to us, "I do not know you," may fill our heart with fear, we can take comfort in the words that we have actually heard him say to us, in Baptism, and in his word, and in the Lord's Supper, words which the prophet Isaiah says: "I have called you by your name; you are mine." "I do know you," Christ says. "You are my beloved child, for whom I died. And it has pleased me, in my mercy, to bring you into the fullness of joy, when I come back."

Until then, dear Christians, we wait and prepare. And we do this, happily looking forward to obtain the fullness of joy in Christ's kingdom, that he will give us when he comes back to raise us, his dear children, from the dead.