

Commitment, Choice and Consequence 2020  
Deuteronomy 30:15-19      Matthew 25:1-13

Deuteronomy 30:15-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

Matthew 25:1-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 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.’ 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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

A group of pastors were sharing stories about ministry,  
their experiences of things going wrong at a wedding.

One of them told about a photographer hired to make a wedding video.

The photographer did a marvelous job shooting the wedding rehearsal  
and when the families gathered for the rehearsal dinner afterward.

The next day he recorded all the wedding preparations,  
capturing the details of the participants getting ready,  
and everyone was pleased with what he was doing.

But then just as the wedding itself was about to begin,  
a red light started to flash. His battery had run down.

He plugged the battery into a wall-outlet to recharge it,  
and realized that he’d forgotten to bring along a spare.

So he rushed out looking for someplace to buy another battery,  
**and wedding proceeded without him.**

It took quite a while to find a battery that fit his video camera,  
and the wedding party was well into the reception  
before he got back and began recording again.

**Both families were livid and the scene turned a bit ugly.**

The photographer’s main job,  
the reason they hired him was to record the wedding ceremony.  
That’s what the families wanted most.

**But because he wasn’t present, ready and prepared.  
He really hadn’t done what they were paying him to do.**

That question of being prepared, present and ready

is the point of the parable that Jesus told in Matthew 25.

In the Gospels when Jesus described the Kingdom of God,  
he would often use a parable or a teaching story  
that was set in the context of a wedding celebration.

However, since wedding customs are so specific to every culture,  
it is helpful to understand weddings of that time and place,  
if we are going to get the point that Jesus is making.

In our culture, a wedding is mostly about the bride, love & romance,  
but in that society, a peasant village of ancient Palestine,  
the focus was more like a business or property arrangement...

... one in which the groom along his family and kinsmen  
would negotiate the "bride's price" or dowry with her family  
while the bride and her attendant bridesmaids waited for them.

**It was a crucial step in joining two families together by marriage.**

As a customary sign of the family's love for their daughter,  
the negotiations were often intentionally long and drawn out,  
to show their great reluctance at giving up their daughter.

If you ever haggled to buy something in a Middle Eastern marketplace  
you can appreciate that the negotiations are mostly  
a process for establishing a relationship of respect.

So according to the parable,

**having appropriately negotiated the "bride's price" at length,  
by now it's very late at night when the groom arrives  
to bring the bride & her attendants for the procession  
on the way to the grand wedding feast & celebration.**

This was long before the age of flashlights and lightbulbs,  
and so **the bridesmaids' task was to provide light with their lamps.**

It was their job and joy to illuminate along the way,  
for their lamps to create a bright & festive atmosphere.

**The parable is framed within that particular cultural context, vs.1-4**

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

Now the bridesmaids have got just one job & responsibility,  
to provide light and be ready for when the groom arrives.

The 5 wise bride's maids fill-up their lamps with their spare oil,  
but the 5 foolish bride's maids have not planned ahead,  
nor during the long delay thought to purchase more oil,  
**so they are not prepared with oil enough for their task.**

They have no oil for their now depleted and empty lamps.

With no oil their lamps go out,  
and so they cannot fulfill that critical responsibility.

So they aren't ready to be present for the procession,

but instead, they leave trying to find and buy more oil.

The foolish ones could not provide light to honor the procession,  
in fact they weren't even present for the procession,  
which within that Middle Eastern cultural context,  
would be a major insult to the bride's and groom's families.

It would be unheard of doing such a rude and thoughtless thing,  
comparable to inviting a date to dinner at a restaurant,  
then suddenly realizing that you forgot your wallet,  
and leaving them there b/c you can't pay for the meal.

So having insulted & dishonored the hosts, they are not welcome back,  
and not permitted to share in the joy of the wedding celebration.

**Because of their choices, they're not present, not prepared & ready,  
so the wedding procession and celebration will go on without them.**

When Matthew was written the community of believers was struggling.  
They'd expected Jesus to return quickly, to return long ago.  
The delay was confusing, disappointing and difficult,  
and it was hard to remain vigilant amid persecution.

**It is a challenge to wait well and prepared when you don't know when.**

Had the groom arrived quickly even the foolish would have been ready.  
The wise bridesmaids were present, ready and prepared  
not only for the groom's arrival, **but also for his delay.**

The wise may have looked a bit foolish carrying along extra oil,  
but they avoided the distraction of running out of oil  
and they were able to focus on the One who was coming.

On the surface, the parable is really that simple & straight forward.  
The obvious application has to do with the second coming of Christ,  
that despite the delay of over 20 centuries, our call & task  
is nevertheless **to be ready, to be alert and waiting well.**

Now, whether it's our own death or the second coming of Jesus,  
at some point the Bridegroom will be coming for us,  
and our call and our task is to be found ready and prepared.

But to reflect a little deeper on this parable,  
maybe there was a better option than leaving the celebration  
to go out to buy more oil ... perhaps that's an issue to consider.

I wonder, could they have remained even without oil for their lamps?  
Aren't bridesmaids chosen from among friends and family? ...  
... so couldn't they have apologized and stayed anyway?

Were they considered foolish only because they ran out of oil,  
or was it also because they abandoned the wedding celebration? ...  
**... and at the time for joy and celebration, they went shopping.**

Maybe the important difference between the wise and the foolish,  
is that the wise stuck around and were focused on the bride & groom,  
and maybe that was more important than having extra oil...

**... to be present, to wait and honor the One who was coming.**

Reading this parable and looking for the grace,  
I'm not sure I'd have the wisdom and foresight to bring extra oil,  
for my walk with God is not always wise, faithful and obedient.

Truth is, I rely  
more on God's grace and mercy than on my own wisdom and good works.  
Maybe the point is, even amid the darkness of foolishness & failure,  
**by grace, to still be present and trust the One who is coming.**

If we believe, if we know and walk with Jesus in faithfulness now,  
isn't it about the joyful return of a close and trusted friend,  
and the happy excitement of a festive celebration.

Before this difficult season of Covid danger and restrictions,  
sometimes Kathy traveled to Louisville **alone** to visit our family  
since it's more difficult to arrange for me to get away.

I'm always pleased, excited and delighted to welcome her back home...  
... and obviously I don't want her to come back and find  
the house all messed up and the sink full of dirty dishes,  
which would spoil the joy and delight of our reunion...

... but even if the house was in a mess and I hadn't clean things up,  
I'd still be there for her and delighted to welcome her back! ...  
...and I certainly wouldn't leave to go buy cleaning supplies.

**The oil for our lamps is our relationship and enthusiasm to follow,  
and to live out God's love, truth and grace, our discipleship...  
... a choice to live by faith a life of God's power and presence,  
that proclaims the good news of Christ to all the world.**

The parable is meant to startle and grab our attention  
and shake awake those who aren't taking God's truth seriously,  
and ask, what are we doing to be ready and prepared? ...  
**... but even if not perfectly prepared, at least choose to be present.**

**The Deuteronomy passage is also about focus and making choices.**

They are preparing to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land,  
finally to receive God's gift of land, grace & promise fulfilled...  
...so Moses warns and admonishes them to live into the blessings of God.

The question was, would they choose to respond faithfully  
to the grace of God's promise and God's gift of land? vs. 15~17, 19  
See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey ... **by loving the Lord your  
God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments** ... the Lord your God will bless you in the land ...  
... I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

This is about our focus, every decision and choice we make in life,  
asking, does this choice move us toward God or away from God,  
and are we a blessing in this world, or part of the problem?

The way we choose to live, by our attitude and by what we do and say,  
the question is,  
is it God's grace and truth that's guiding and influencing us,

for that is how we translate the Gospel into life and living.

The text is a call for an appropriate response to God's blessings,  
a call & challenge as believers, as disciples to serve & be present  
by reflecting God's love and compassion toward other people,  
which is to fulfill our mission as given by God to us all...  
... in contrast to just playing at the edges of Christian discipleship.

A pastor-friend serves a downtown church, and he talks about  
how sometimes trash will blow onto the church property.  
So too he explains, trash and corruption from our world and culture  
such as selfishness, consumerism, materialism, worry and fear,  
can also blow in and influence and disrupt our Christian walk.

And we can get too busy and be distracted with things of this world,  
or blind and insensitive to corrupting impurities of our culture  
and misplace our affections and desires, our values and goals...

... and not even be aware of such trash blowing in from the outside,  
or that we're compromising the word and truth of God  
for the sake of our own comfort, popularity or ease.

By our choices, when other people encounter us out in the world,  
does the presence of God in us make any discernable difference?,  
and is God's gracious love transforming us in a way  
that attracts others toward a relationship with God?

In our world & in our ordinary living, we make choices constantly,  
and we are challenged to live distinctly into God's saving grace...  
...to be aware of the danger of being seduced and corrupted,  
for there are real consequences by what we choose and decide,  
**since either God is the priority of our lives, or God is not.**

Our task as the people of God, as the redeemed followers of Christ,  
is to translate Scripture by standing distinctly as disciples,  
which includes being present, prepared and waiting well...

... for if we want our lives to make a difference as Christians,  
then our faith has to be active, authentic and growing deeper,  
**for we must be the hope and change that we want to see.**

Our call & our challenge today, just two simple words, 'choose life.'  
Choose to trust God's gracious love by being present and alert,  
even if we can't be perfect and faithful every moment of our lives.

As Jesus described it in a different wedding parable, Luke 12:35-38

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; ... If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, **blessed are those slaves.**