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Book 2

Sunday July 23, 1972

"THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH" Matthew 25, 1-13

INTRODUCTION

Here is a story which speaks to all of us and to all of life. For not only is the kingdom of heaven like this parable, but all of life can be compared to the ten maidens who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom, five were foolish and five were wise. So it is with life and with us--some are foolish and unprepared and some are wise and ready.

This story of the ten maidens made a vivid picture to those who heard Jesus tell it. A wedding party was one of the great festivities in a Palestinian village. Men were given the day off. Children were let out of the synagogue school. Women hurried through their household work and all went to the wedding and remained for the celebration. This was not only a privilege, but a duty.

The high point of the wedding celebration came when the bridegroom took the bride from her father's house to their new home. That is where Jesus picks up the story. The neighborhood girls were waiting for the bridegroom to bring his bride home so that they could join in the celebration there. But there was a long wait and drowsiness came upon them.

Finally at midnight they were awakened by the announcement that the bridegroom was arriving. Five of the girls, seeing that their lamps were almost extinguished, asked the others to share oil with them. This they would not do, so the foolish maidens were forced to seek more oil elsewhere and while they were searching for oil, the celebration took place and they missed it completely.

Now most scholars agree that when Jesus originally told this story, he was probably referring to himself as the bridegroom and also referring to the fact that many were unprepared for his coming and by the time they would be ready, it would be too late. The event would have passed them by. Later on, the early church as it remembered this story understood it primarily as dealing with the second coming of Christ and of being ready for it.

However, through the years, the parable has also taken on a broader meaning, for above all it is a parable which

deals with the issue in life of waiting and of being ready while we wait.

The fact is that all of us together, Christians or not, young and old find that there is a lot of waiting to be done in this world. LIfe is made up of waiting for one thing and then another. Some of the waiting we do in joyful anticipation and other waiting is done in fear and trembling.

One of the reasons that Christmas has such a magical attraction for us is because we're waiting for it, anticipating it. We are anxious for it to come and yet we also enjoy the time of waiting and preparation. This past week the mailman brought to our home the first of the Christmas catalogs and the children immediately spent one whole evening going through it very carefully and they began making lists.

Pascal once said that we really never seek for things, what we enjoy is the search for things. And another man in speaking of the sport of hunting said that we actually do not seek the trophies and the game itself, the object of the hunt. Rather we get pleasure from lying in wait at the blind and from the act of hunting itself more than the object.

So it is that this parable speaks of waiting which is an integral part of all of our lives.

Now there are several kinds of waiting. In one kind, like waiting for Christmas or for some other kinds of holidays and celebrations like birthdays, we know when it's all going to happen. With this kind of waiting, we have time to be ready, to prepare.

But there is another kind of waiting and with this kind we do not know exactly when the event is going to take place. We do not know when we are going to die. We do not know when we are going to be sick. We do not know either about many of the happy surpries of our life--a relative visits us unexpectedly or a gift arrives that we had not expected at that time. A promotion comes earlier than we had expected or later than we had expected. It is with this kind of waiting that the parable deals. It ends with the statement--"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

And in this kind of waiting, the parable is saying that we are to be ready, be prepared at all times. Otherwise like the foolish maidens, we may miss what we wanted most.

I had a professor in college whose custom it was to pick out any one of us to give a summary of the preceding class session. Nobody knew whose turn was next. You can be sure that most of us paid strict attention. Other teachers had a different method. Before the hour began they assigned a student to prepare a report. Then we knew that everything was taken care of. Nothing unexpected could happen. It all proceeded according to schedule and a person could go on carving his initials on the desk.

But Jesus is saying here that the Kingdom of God is not like that--there are some surprises. We may be called on almost anytime and we are to be prepared. He's also saying that life does not always run on a pre-determined schedule. Rather it's more like that first professor in whose class nobody knew whose turn was next. There are some things we are to prepare for without knowing when they will happen. Much of the insurance industry is built on this principle. We often buy insurance so that we are prepared for the unexpected.

Thus it is that this is a parable which speaks to us of the responsibility to be ready, for the hour of the bridegroom is unknown.

With this is mind, let's now look more closely at the preparation and waiting of the five wise maidens. And here we must surely be struck by one curious feature of the parable. What it says is that all of them, the unprepared and the prepared, the foolish and the wise, fell asleep while they were waiting.

But perhaps these are two quite different kinds of sleep. The wise maidens had put their lamps in order. They had a supply of oil and so they went to sleep with some anticipation but without anxiousness. Their last thought was of the joy of awakening for the celebration and for the good things that were going to happen. They were prepared.

And so also the foolish maidens went to sleep. But I think they went to sleep simply because they grew tired of waiting. They went to sleep in disappointment. What Why hadn't the bridegroom come? What's he waiting for? They had banked on the premise that he would come early

and that they therefore would need very little oil for their lamps if any. Now perhaps they had given up hope that he would ever come any more that night. Thus they were not prepared for the unexpected. Theirs was a kind of hopeless waiting and a kind of hopeless sleep.

But the parable speaks of more than just waiting. The parable also emphasizes being prepared for the best as well as the worst. This is something of a new approach for many of us, for usually when we think of being prepared, we think of it primarily as being prepared for the worst. Much of the insurance that we buy is for protection against disaster. But the wise girls prepared for the wedding feast and for the joy of a wondeful occasion. They prepared for a celebration. It was to be a grand event and they knew that to be a part of it demanded readiness.

Don't most of us, however, if we prepare at all, prepare for the worst? Consider how men throw all their efforts in readiness for destructive ends. Thus we spend millions getting ready for war, but we spend very little for the establishment of peace. We pay gladly for weapons and grow suddenly very stingy when asked to feed the hungry and heal the sick. We spend more on prisons that we do on crime prevention.

In our private lives, we often try to prepare for the rainy day, but we give not as much thought to preparing for the sunny ones. I wonder how much we miss because we are not ready to see. We recall the depression of the 1930's and we want to be protected from its repetition. But the days of prosperity find us unready to be thankful for their gifts or aware of their dangers.

Joy at midnight! We're often unprepared for it. A man buys insurance against fire, but makes no preparation in mind or spirit for married joy. And if we talk to some about getting prepared for marriage so that they can enjoy the good in it--they're often not interested or think it's uncessary. Even Christianity of a kind makes the mistake of being ready only for death, meanwhile being unready for life here and now. The parable is saying that the midnights are not just the sign of doom but they can also be the hour when great joy comes. But when the cry sounds, then there is no time for preparation. Either we are ready or we are not.

Thus the tragedy of many lifes is in missing the best, in not being ready for the best. We are aware of the best only

after it has passed us by and the door is shut. We are not prepared to see the voices of hope and joy nor do we see the visions of loveliness all about us. The wisdom of the wise maidens in the parable tell us that good events demand preparation for their enjoyment as much as bad events demand preparation for their endurance.

Thirdly, the parable reminds us that when the best or the worst comes unexpectedly at midnight, there are some things we cannot borrow. We live in an economy where we are sometimes led to believe that we can borrow or lease anything that we need at anytime. The foolish maidenswere foolish because they assumed they could borrow from someone else if they were caught short in their own preparation. And so it is. That there will always be somebody around to fill our lack is one of the generally accepted ideas which is very popular. Let others make the provisions and in a pinch we will find some kind person to lend us what we need.

But the foolish maidens were fooled. When they asked to borrow some oil, the wise maidens refused. They said, "No perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you--go rather and to the dealers and buy for yourselves."

The point is again that Jesus was saying there are some things that cannot be borrowed. Some kinds of preparedness, being ready, cannot be instantly shared with someone else.

Think of it! Can a person trained with long experience in decision making and responsibility instantly lend this to someone else? Can a person trained in Christian courage give it on demand to a neighbor who all of his life has lived in cowardly comfort?

Can a saint who has gathered insight from long years of prayer instantly give that insight on request to someone else who has always been careless of God? Can a person who has never really grown up or assumed responsibility all of a sudden one -day say--"Ineed to be an adult now and I want to get married." Maturity won't come to him quite that fast and it cannot be borrowed immediately from someone else. Can a person who has never learned to love or known love, all of a sudden one day borrow love from someone else and become a loving person that very instant?

There are some things which cannot be borrowed. WE cannot borrow many kinds of experience and skills which only come from adequate preparation. In spite of the fact that we

have instant coffee and instant tea and many other so-called instant products, we cannot borrow instant love or instant experience or instant maturity or instant courage.

We cannot borrow character. There come times in all of our lives when great depth of character is needed. There come times when we face difficult decisions and at such times we cannot borrow character. In the same way we cannot borrow morality. There comes atime when it is too late to all of a sudden develop moral standards, too late to develop good habits, too late to borrow oil for our lamps so that we might see the right way.

We cannot borrow friends. If all of our life we think we can go it alone and sluff off other people and treat them in a cavalier fashion, there may come the time when we need a friend very much and we will find that we cannot borrow one or lease one.

And we cannot borrow a faith. We all love the hymn--Faith of our fathers living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Well that faith lives because it was their faith, it was a part of them and thus continued in spite of dungeon, fire and sword.

But our faith has to be more than just the faith of our fathers--that is, we have to make it our own, otherwise it will not live in spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Faith is another one of those things that cannot be borrowed.

Again, all of this is to say that this is a parable of waiting and readiness. The fact of life is that there is no shortcut to obtaining the things we cannot borrow. People often choose the correct goal, the right ideal, but then they do not choose the means which alone can lead to the obtaining of the goal. The foolish maidens had chosen to join in the celebration of the wedding, but they did not prepare themselves so that when the celebration came they could be in on it.

Having no oil is the ultimate tragedy of irreligion. I am not saying that irreligious people are unhappy. There is much in the world that responds to much that is in them. Their gay moods can be answered by gaieties, their esthetic moods by beauties, their truthloving moods by science, their affectionate moods by human love. There is much in the world, religion or no religion to make it interesting and valuable. Yet when all of this is granted, for the thorough-

going irreligionist a tragedy lies in way. Some day his life will go out into the depths--profound trouble, profound love, profound moral need, profound, ethical devotion, profound spiritual insight--and then the deep will call out for a depth at the center of life to answer it and what if there is no oil there and it cannot be borrowed.