

Showing Up For the Party
 Sermon on Matthew 25:1-13
 Pastor Julie McCain, 3/15/15



Please pray with me. Speak, O Lord, in words that we can hear. Open our hearts to your word, and plant the light of your grace deep in our hearts. Amen.

You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town.

- Replace Santa with Jesus, and you've got a pretty good summary of why this parable is disturbing.

It appears to say that there are no second chances. If we give it our best go but are a bit foolish and show up late to the party, we aren't getting in. We're left wondering what the oil represents and whether we have enough of it, and we're left hoping but not really knowing whether Jesus would call *us* foolish or wise.

Now certainly part of what the parable is telling us is that what you do with your faith matters.

- Faith should affect the way we live.

It is not just about what's going on in our hearts, but also how we share that with those around us, and Jesus really doesn't want us to miss that piece of the puzzle.

But this parable is NOT the Jesus version of "You better watch out," and it isn't threatening that if we don't shape up the door to heaven will be forever slammed in our faces.

Let me tell you why.

Jesus calls us to be prepared, and I have to confess that I like to think I'm a lot better at being prepared than I actually am.

I'm a planner and a list-maker, but my husband will tell you that my lists are often incomplete, as evidenced by the backpacking trip in which I forgot the lighter. We didn't realize it until we sat down to make dinner after a long day of hiking, pulled out our camping stove, and found that we had no way to light it. And in another instance, I was tasked with doing all the packing for our camping trip and completely forgot to bring my husband any pants!

We all have stories like that. Despite our best intentions, it's simply impossible to always be prepared.

And that still holds true when we talk about the kind of preparedness Jesus wants from us.

And in the parable, too, even the bridesmaids labeled as "wise" fall asleep on the job.

Just one chapter later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus and the disciples go to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is at his darkest hour and asks only one thing from his closest followers: that they stay awake with him.

→But lacking a triple espresso or a can of red bull, the disciples simply can't pull it off, and here, too, not even one can stay awake.

So if you are wondering whether you have enough oil in your lamp, enough wisdom in your spirit, or enough good works under your belt for Jesus to let you into the great wedding feast, let go of that, because the answer is this:

→You absolutely do not have enough, because it is impossible for us to climb our way into heaven, and we thank God that we don't have to try.

As Ephesians tells us: "By grace you have been saved through faith. It is the gift of God, so that no one can boast."

So this parable is NOT talking about whether or not we will get into heaven.

That is all already taken care of.

So let's dive in a bit deeper to see what it's actually saying.

The first thing to note is that a wedding was different than it is today.

The groom being late doesn't mean that the bride was waiting at the altar.

In fact, the couple would've taken care of all of the legal stuff when they got engaged. Then they would have a period of preparation, and all that was left to do now was celebrate; at that celebration, the bridesmaids had one task: wait for the groom and light the way for him when he arrives

The bridesmaids in our story do exactly that, but as it starts to get late, one by one they all nod off. When they're jolted awake, it's to the sound of someone shouting that the bridegroom has arrived and the party can finally begin.

But with the groom in sight, five of the bridesmaids wander off in search of oil for their lamps. It means that they aren't there to celebrate his arrival, and they aren't there for the start of the party.

It's also worth noting that at midnight the oil dealers would have all been closed, so instead of greeting the groom, they probably spend their time out in the street knocking on doors in hopes that someone will wake up and happen have some oil to spare.

And we're never told whether they find oil or not.

→Perhaps because it's not really about the oil. But nonetheless, their search for it causes them to show up after the bouquet has already been tossed.

It reminds me of the movie *Father of the Bride*. In it, Steve Martin plays the father. When he finds out his daughter is engaged, he's in disbelief that his little girl is old

enough to be somebody's bride. He wishes that she could stay little and his forever, and so he finds it understandably difficult to get into the wedding spirit.

It doesn't help that the scope of the wedding is huge, and Steve Martin's character lets every little thing get to him. In one scene, Steve Martin is at the store in his tux having a bit of a breakdown. He discovers, to his dismay, that hot dogs come in packs of eight, but hot dog buns come in packs of 12, so he rips open the bag of hot dog buns and shoves 4 buns back on the shelf. A startled employee tries to no avail to calm him, but Steve Martin just gets more and more agitated, and the incident eventually ends up landing him in jail.

He spends so much time focused on what's going wrong and worried about losing his little girl, that he misses out on a lot of the fun.

And like him, we can get so distracted that we miss out on the joy of the party.

- Whatever the oil represents, we get worried that we don't have enough.
- We get anxious about the fact that the groom hasn't showed up yet,
- or we worry that he'll notice that we've fallen asleep.

We can get so wrapped up in and worried about the details that we forget that we've been invited to a party.

And I'm not talking about the one we'll celebrate in heaven, because as I said, that's already taken care of and our distractedness in no way determines our place at *that* table.

No, there's a party that's already started, a banquet that's already begun.

It's the same thing we pray for every time we say these words:

your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We ask God to bring his kingdom, his party, not just to heaven, but also to earth, right here, right now.

We're pleading with God to bring out the next course of the feast and to use us to serve the champagne.

And this is the kind of party you want to be at.

As one theologian says: Jesus is not your mother-in-law coming over to see whether you've chipped the wedding china she gave you.

No, Jesus' party is the kind you don't want to miss:

It's a celebration for those who couldn't stay awake but still want to dance, a feast where there's enough wine and cake for all.

And as we keep looking for signs of that party—for streamers and champagne bottles all around us—the host of the feast asks only that we leave the details to him. After all, when we run out of oil in our lamps, the light of the world can surely light the way for us. Amen.