

Don't Leave Yourself Behind!

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ ‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

Do you have any smoke detectors in your home? Good, then you are a wise person. When is the last time you checked the batteries? Let’s say you are tucking your daughter or grand-daughter into bed. She asks, “What is that red light?” “Oh, it’s the smoke detector. That red light means the battery is almost dead and needs replacing. I will do that tomorrow,” you answer. You meant to change the batteries before, but you didn’t. You intend to change them tomorrow, but will you? Weeks and months go by and you still didn’t change those batteries. What if there is a fire in the meantime? Now you are foolish.

That is exactly the point Jesus is making in this parable. This month our sermons talk about the legacy we can leave behind. Because of Jesus we will leave this world and go to heaven. What will you leave behind? Last week we heard about some of the good we do which we can leave behind. Today, we want to make sure we don’t leave ourselves behind.

That means checking the batteries. You were baptized. Good. You went to Sunday School. Good. You were confirmed. Good. You are a wise person. But what about now? Is your faith fresh and lively, or are your batteries slowly dying? Christ is coming. Are you ready for it? Let’s be wise. Let’s check our batteries so we are ready when he comes.

I. What it means to be unprepared.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” To help us keep watch, Jesus uses a parable about a wedding. What goes on in a wedding? First, a man and a woman decide to get married. Usually they get engaged, but engagement is not marriage. That comes later. A ceremony or wedding service is planned where they legally, officially and publicly become husband and wife. After that, there is a reception.

It was a little different in Jesus’ day. The couple usually got married right away, often in a short ceremony. But they did not start living and acting as husband and wife yet. That did not come until later, when they publicly had a celebration. That is why Joseph, when he found out Mary was pregnant, was going to divorce her quietly. They did not come together as husband and wife yet. The public celebration had not happened.

Now this is what happens on the day of that celebration. The groom, dressed like a king, would ride a donkey to the bride’s house. She would join him and as they traveled to his home for the celebration, the guests would meet them on the road and join them. Often it was at night and each guest would carry a torch or lantern. When they all arrived at the groom’s home, the gate would be locked to prevent any one who was not invited from crashing the party.

When my niece was married a month ago, the party was held in a downtown location of a large city. They had a security guard at the door. I was a little puzzled until I stepped outside. Even at only eleven at night, the streets were filled with loud people, some of whom had too much to drink. It would have been very disastrous if a couple of them decided to “crash” the reception. Hence the guard, and in Jesus’ parable, locking the door.

But there is a problem. In Jesus’ parable, five guests missed out of the celebration. Like the rest, they were invited. Like the rest, they went into the streets. Like the rest they had their lanterns and oil. But that is where they were foolish. The rest brought extra oil just in case. They didn’t. And they remained foolish. The groom was late; they had time to go and buy oil, but they didn’t. They fell asleep like the rest thinking somehow it will be fine later. But the cry woke everyone up, ***‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’*** Everyone got up and refilled their empty lanterns with oil, but not these five virgins. They had none.

In desperation, they asked for oil, but then no one would have enough oil and they all would miss the wedding celebration. Desperately they tried to find an open store to buy what they needed. While they were gone the bridegroom came, the procession entered his house and the gate was locked. ***“Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ ‘But he replied, I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’”*** It was too late.

The parable is simple. The bridegroom is Jesus. The wedding celebration is heaven. The ten virgins or guests are all those who belong to a church or congregation on earth.

So why would Jesus warn believers who already belong to churches when so many out there don’t believe? It is not because Jesus isn’t concerned for the lost. He is. But Jesus is concerned about the lost he found that they do not become lost again. And as the parable sadly points out, many who are in church will be foolish and miss out on heaven. Why? They gamble. They

assume that having been churched at one time is enough. They don't think about it today or tomorrow. It is like the smoke detectors. They don't change the batteries today. They plan on doing it tomorrow, and tomorrow they say the same: I'll do it tomorrow. They assume there will be a tomorrow, but the fire may happen today!

Someone may say, "I was baptized." We at first think, "Good." But that is foolish. It is better to say, "I am baptized." What's the difference? Saying you were baptized is in the past tense, as if it is something that happened and you no longer think about it. "I am baptized" is in the present; it still applies to you today and you are thinking about it.

Being foolish is gambling, assuming what was live and well in the past, faith, is enough and you don't need any more faith or God's Word today or tomorrow or next week. It also assumes you don't have to follow Christ today, that is, join his wedding procession to heaven, that somehow you can forget about him and knock on the door after Judgment and that somehow, because you were once a child of God and once in church is enough. ***"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'"***

II. What it means to be prepared?

So, how can we be prepared for his return? First, be wise. Remember what Paul said to Timothy, how from infancy Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures which made him WISE unto salvation. Being prepared is being wise unto salvation. It is David saying, "I have sinned," and being told God forgives him. It is Job saying, "I know my Redeemer lives and in the end I will see him." It is the tax collector beating his chest because of his sins, unworthy even to look up to heaven, but going home justified because of Christ. It is the fact that we, lost and condemned creatures, are saved by the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We are invited and have a place at the wedding feast!

You are wise. Now, let's remain wise. Let's not assume the batteries will last forever and think we can change them tomorrow. Let's change them today. How? How can we just as excited about Jesus and heaven today as when we sang about him at age seven in the children's Christmas service? Simple. The answer is "daily repentance." Someone may say that changing nine volt batteries in a dozen smoke detectors every day is a waste; those batteries should last longer. And that is true. But one thing is guaranteed: if you change them each day, they will never run out!

Repentance is studying your life and heart and mind and uncovering the sins that exist. Repentance is being shamed over them, scared of them, hating them. But repentance is also finding relief that God is just and right to forgive us and to cleanse us from all sins and promise us eternal life in Jesus. If you heard last Sunday that Jesus died for you and you are forgiven is good. It should last more than a week. It takes a lot to kill saving faith.

But that is the difference between the wise and the foolish. The foolish will say, "I was baptized. I was confirmed. I had gone to church in the past," as if the batteries will last forever. They will gamble there will always be time tomorrow. The wise, however, know today may be the day the Bridegroom comes and don't want to gamble. They will check the batteries, replace them or charge them up today.

The key, of course, is God's Word and his Sacraments. His Word will be the blinking light, showing us our need for Jesus and recharging us with the gospel. Baptism wasn't just for when you are young. It serves us each day as Baptism continuously assures we are washed clean and will inherit eternal life. Communion gives us the very body and blood of Jesus which won for us forgiveness.

When I dress in the morning, I sometimes feel like a soldier putting on his gear. I put my glasses in my shirt pocket. I put a hanky in my left front pocket. I put my keys in my right front pocket. I put a pen in my shirt pocket. I put my cell phone in my pants pocket and my wallet in my back pocket. I am ready for the day. Now imagine dressing each day with God's Word, so we wear the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation and the shield of faith. Now we are ready, not only for the day, but the Day just in case the call goes out, "The Bridegroom comes. Come and join him."

Do you know of any place where they have a good price on nine volt batteries? I need to change the batteries in a dozen or so smoke detectors. I know I haven't changed them in a while. Guess what? The bridegroom isn't here quite yet. We still have time. He's giving your brother or cousin or neighbor time, too. Let's change the batteries now, not tomorrow, and then we will not leave ourselves behind. Then we can honestly pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus," today and not tomorrow. Amen.