

# KEEP WATCH

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## Remaining Ready For The King

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

### The Importance of Being Ready

There is an amazing anticipation that leads up to Christmas. Retail businesses prepare for the Christmas season all year long. Highway, civic, and emergency services start laying out their plans for it soon after summer. Children in most homes start angling toward it the day after Halloween! And chances are that you've been working toward Christmas for quite a few weeks now, getting ready for it, trying to figure out how to make the best of it or just survive it – only to arrive here today as the cycle starts again.

We all know about the importance of readiness, of good preparation, in short, of "keeping watch" for what is to come. From preschool onward we are constantly working to prepare our kids for the next stage, the next test, the next opportunity. Preparedness is the topic *de jour* from the Department of Homeland Security on down to the local Boy Scout meeting. "Get ready for what's coming" is the watch-phrase of ob-gyn's, financial consultants, urban planners, and tech gurus alike. Even we church leaders get all caught up in readying ourselves for the next major holiday, special program, or ministry need.

Jesus had His own thoughts about preparedness. The One whose first Advent we've worked so hard to ready ourselves for, elevated one concern above all others when it came to being prepared. **"Keep watch,"** he said, **"because you do not know the day or the hour"** when I will return (**Mat 25:13**). The theme of being ready for the SECOND and FINAL Advent of Christ is one that doesn't seem to get much serious airplay these days. That's odd, I think, because the One born at Bethlehem broadcast it on every bandwidth He could.

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus took a medical and metaphysical angle. He said: **Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.** In Matthew 6:19, Jesus hit the message from a financial security approach: **Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but... treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.** In Matthew 25:31, Jesus underlined the principle of readiness again, this time in both rural and urban terms: **When the Son of Man comes in his glory... All the nations will be gathered before him... and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats... Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry**

**and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”**

In a stunning and studied variety of images, Jesus sought to make sure that no one could leave thinking that following Him was only about what God did long ago, or merely about good religious feelings at holiday times, or simply about a slight improvement in human standards of living. He wanted all of us to know three things above all else: *First*, that He was definitely coming back. *Secondly*, that when He did, some of us would be heading for a lot worse than bodily death. And *thirdly*, that God’s deepest desire is that no one goes to Hell – but that every person have a future filled with forever health, eternal security, and everlasting joy. Thus Jesus says in John 3:17: **For God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

### **A Wedding Story**

But lest we still miss the sober truth of what’s coming and the goodness of God’s desires, Jesus frames the truth in yet another way, this time in a form to which almost every one, even the folks in Hollywood, can relate. He tells a wedding story. **At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.** What Jesus says here, as elsewhere, is that God’s overarching desire is to draw us to Himself in a relationship of everlasting love. It is through our bond with Him alone that we find the final health, security, and joy which all of us seek and which He seeks us in order to give.

At the start of the parable all ten maidens appear equally excited about this opportunity. All ten light their lamps and spend the night waiting for Bridegroom to arrive. But only five of them make it to the altar. And the difference between these two kinds of people – with the way they **“Keep watch”** -- is the point of the tale. Jesus is telling us that there are **TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE: 1.** Those who like the idea of the benefits of being married but who can’t bear the waiting; and **2.** Those who truly prepare for the Bridegroom, trusting Him through the night. Which kind of person are you or I? And how do we tell?

Whether in a relationship with human beings or in one with God, waiting for the full benefits we’ve been promised isn’t easy, is it? Deferred gratification is always challenging. Jesus says **The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and [all of the maidens] became drowsy and fell asleep.** Yet in a radical twist on the usual Hollywood story, it is how these women go to bed that makes all the difference. Five of the virgins apparently grew tired of waiting for the Bridegroom’s return. Perhaps they’d worked furiously to get ready for Him at the start, feeling the weight of the wedding all on their shoulders and, like many a bride, had simply worn out. Maybe they gave up

hope that there really was a transforming relationship and end to their lives. Perhaps they became enamored with other people or things. But, in any case, it's clear they no longer believed that the Bridegroom would come or was worth the wait. Do you know how we know that? It's because they didn't bother to stock up on the *lamp oil* they'd need to respond to His call when He came.

There are many who fall to sleep in this way – though it isn't always literal slumber. We can fall into unconsciousness about God or the Day of Final Calling in many different ways. We may simply anaesthetize ourselves with a mind-numbing dose of chemicals or the adrenaline rush of constant activity. We may make dreaming with our eyes wide open our way of life -- filling our minds with a steady stream of video images, news flashes, financial data and trivia – making us “dead to the world” of God and the reality of the Reckoning to come.<sup>1</sup>

But this doesn't change what will happen. **At midnight the cry [will ring] out**, says Jesus **“Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”** At that moment, many people will remember that they once had light to see their way to Him. They'll remember those days in Sunday School as a child, before sleep closed in upon their souls. They'll recall that time in the crisis or that holiday worship service when the light seemed to shine so brightly in them for a moment and they took some faltering steps toward Christ's outstretched hand, only to put their head back on the more popular pillows others use to cushion their way. Whatever oil of vital faith they once had has long since burned away. The cry rings out, “Come to the Bridegroom,” but the way is too murky and uncertain now, for “what once was a flickering gleam has guttered into gloom.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A Different Kind of Waiting**

It was not that way for the other five Maidens in Christ's parable. For though they were asleep too when the Bridegroom came, the Wise Ones had gone to bed in a very different way. Jesus said that they had taken the time to stock up extra **oil in jars along with their lamps**, so that when it came time to rise they had plenty of light with which to see their way to the Bridegroom. The question we ought to be asking, of course, is what does this “*oil in jars*” represent? And how do I make sure I have plenty?

Helmut Thielecke, to whom I owe some of the best insights into this passage, suggests that this oil signifies a life of prayerful relationship with Christ. That seems to make sense. Things that burn are frequently viewed in Scripture as symbols of a life of prayerful communion with God. There is the oil that burned for eight days; and the incense that was burned to represent the prayers of the saints; and Moses' encounter with the burning bush. There are candles and burnt offerings, each representing an effort toward communion with God. By this light, then, the message of the parable becomes even clearer. It is only those who are truly engaged with the Bridegroom –

not simply superficially, or once long ago, or because their parents tried to arrange it -- but in a continuing personal quest for daily intimacy that will be married to Christ forever when He returns at last.

Jesus makes this clear in the next verses: **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."**

Jesus is saying, in effect: "How can we be married, when we haven't really been engaged?" It is only those who are sharing with Christ the questions and confessions, the temptations and trials of the day that He comes to know. It is those who are interceding for neighbors and praying the Scriptures as if speaking to a lover or Someone one wants to love – who will have the light needed to find their way through the darkness or be found by the Bridegroom in time.

What is more, if we are truly engaged with Christ, we will be able to endure the long night of waiting. Oiled by prayer, even our sleeping will be different. We will know that even when we are utterly insensible to it, Christ is at work -- structuring the times, preparing the future, coming closer. We will be less inclined to toss and turn in fear and frustration and more able to enjoy the slumber of trust and hope. For as the wise men knew the King was to be born, so the wise also know that He will return once more. And what a Day that will be!

We believe that when the Last Battle with evil is done, the Babe of Bethlehem, no longer wearing swaddling clothes but robed in glory, will still be standing in, eyes gleaming with victory. We believe that billions of confusing stories will finally converge and be resolved at His feet. We believe that all the flights of the faithful, no matter how turbulent or terrorized in our vision now, will at last arrive safely at home in His eternal land. We know that there shall be a grand reconciliation and a great reunion and a glorious banquet.

And, because of this, we the Bride of Christ know how to regard this stretch of the journey each of us and all of us are now on. When we are facing the difficult exams ahead or the hard medical facts... When we are staring in the eye a looming business or financial crisis... when we are struggling with a child or parent or problem that just won't seem to come around... We know that, somehow, these realities are not blocks to God's good intentions for us. They are part of the great processional that leads to that place before the altar where the darkness clears and Christ stands before us, saying: "Come, my beloved, for you are mine."

Will you live on the strength of His promise, His vows to you in this year to come? Will you trust that though you know not the day or hour of His coming, because He has said that He will come – He will? Will you dare to believe that when He does arrive at last it

will be the defining moment in which all of your waiting makes sense? It is in this faith that the wise feel moved to prepare and also free to rest. So let's get our lamps ready, for He has called us to let our light shine more brightly the darker it gets. Let's stock extra oil, more daily prayer, just in case the Bridegroom tarries. And as we go to sleep tonight, let's know with greater certainty that it will be to joy – for whenever we awake it will be just that much closer to the coming of our Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> This is how it was in the days of Noah, prior to the great Flood, said Jesus. Their bodies were plenty active, but their spirits were out for the count. **"People were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."** (Matt 24:37-39)

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Thielecke, *The Waiting Father*, p.178