

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF END TIME - SAINTS TRIUMPHANT

Living Each Day As If Jesus Will Return

Matthew 25:1-13 (NIV)

¹ "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶ "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' ⁷ "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' ⁹ " '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.' ¹⁰ "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. ¹¹ "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' ¹² "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.' ¹³ "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

Matthew chapter 24 is all about the signs of the end, the events leading up to when Jesus comes to earth a second time. We call Jesus' second coming the "Last Day" or "Judgment Day" because on the day he returns, he will end the world and judge all people. All the signs leading up to Jesus' second coming have (arguably) taken place: wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution of Christians, people falsely claiming to be Jesus, and the Gospel being preached to the ends of the earth. This means that we live in the end times and that Jesus can return at any moment. Do you believe that Jesus can return today, before our service is over? Would you be ready if he returned in the next 20 minutes?

It's with that idea of preparedness that Jesus relates this parable of 10 virgins waiting for the groom to arrive to begin the wedding banquet. All 10 bring lamps so that they can welcome the groom with light, show him the way to the banquet. The groom, though, was a long time in coming, much longer than expected, leaving all 10 virgins dozing off. When he finally arrives, they light their lamps, but the 5 who didn't bring any extra oil for their lamps panicked as their lamps began to go out. They begged the 5 who did bring oil that they give them their oil, but there wasn't enough to spare. The ones without the oil had to go out and try to buy some with the groom quickly approaching. In the end, the ones who weren't ready, who didn't have oil with them, they were shut out of the wedding banquet while the ones who were prepared entered in and enjoyed the banquet.

The point of Jesus' parable: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." (verse 13) Be prepared for Jesus to return any day at any moment because we don't know when it will happen, but the signs have been fulfilled. Are you ready for Jesus' return for Judgment Day? Are you ready for your Judgment Day?

What would you do if you knew for a fact that Jesus was returning in the next 20 minutes? Would your first inclination be, "Why am I wasting time in church? I need to go out and do those things that I never got the chance to do? I need to blow my savings on things I always wanted to get? I want to go out and eat a cheeseburger or a cheesecake one last time before he comes?" Do you hear that Jesus is coming in just a few minutes and the last things you want to do are all about indulging, and, really, selfishness? In those final moments, would we use the fact that we already know Jesus died for our sins as a license to indulge in sin? If anything, this would make us less prepared for Jesus' return because sin divides us from God, pushes us away from him. These would be the actions of one of the foolish virgins.

Then again, if Jesus was returning in the next 20 minutes, this is exactly the place you would want to be, right? In God's house, worshiping him, hearing his Word, being comforted by his promises, partaking in his Supper one more time, praying for him to come and take you to the wedding banquet in heaven. It's not like you can take a holier road than that right now, do a couple more good things before Jesus returns to make sure you are on his good side. (But that's not how it works.) Would we be content being where we are because we know what Jesus has done for us and that we do seize the day to love our God first and foremost and love our neighbors as Christ loved us?

When it comes to being ready for Jesus' return, are we living as the wise virgins or as the foolish ones? Are we prepared for Jesus to return because we do not know when the Lord will return to judge us?

If you considered each opportunity and each interaction as if it were your last, how would that change what you do? When Sunday morning (or Monday night) rolls around, do you think that this might be your last time to come to church, to hear God's Word, to pray to him, to sing to him, to receive his Supper? Or are you banking on the fact that church will be there next week just like it

always has? What if today is the last time? Honestly, the question came up earlier this year when we suspended in person worship due to COVID, and that conversation has been revisited. It looms as a possibility that maybe we are taking our ability to gather as Christians and worship our Lord for granted. Or think about how you left that conversation the other day. If that was the last time that you would ever talk with that person, how did you leave it? Was it on a positive note? An encouraging note? Are you ready to be judged for it?

The foolish ones say, "Jesus won't come and judge when I don't expect him to. I'll have advance warning. I'll know when it's time. He's not going to come in the next 20 minutes. He probably won't even come in my lifetime, and I plan on living a good long life. And if he does come, there will be time to get ready before it all actually comes to an end. So, I might as well live like he isn't returning. Let's go and indulge. Let's push off God because we live in peace and safety." Has that been a temptation for you: to push off worshiping God and being in his Word because there are too many other things that need my attention, things that soak up my time and energy and I honestly make as a priority over my God? Am I ready to be judged for that?

The wise ones say, "I know my Lord. I treasure his sacrifice and his perfect life lived for me every single day. I ask God daily to show me opportunities to shine his Light to others, to serve my neighbors. Christ has made me complete. I'm perfect in him. I am ready for whenever he says it's time." Being prepared for Jesus' return on the Last Day comes only through Christ himself. As we heard last week, our hands are cleansed, purified, by the blood of the Lamb. He makes our robes white before God. This is the gift that he has given to us in our baptisms. We were redeemed without money but by with the precious blood of the perfect Lamb of God. The matter of our preparedness is settled in God's court already: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." (Isaiah 1:18) Our verdict on Judgment Day is in. We are declared definitively, "Not guilty!" The sentence: we will live forever in heaven with God! That's how we are ready for Jesus' return to judge us, just as the wise virgins were.

As you reflect at night on the events of the day, maybe you realize that you displayed some of the traits of the foolish virgins. If I haven't spent time connecting with God, then right now is as good as ever and it might be the last time. It is a good time to ask God to forgive you for what you knowingly and unknowingly did wrong. Today is a good day to read about how God loves you unconditionally as shown by Jesus' total sacrifice for all my sins, all the times I have pushed off loving God and loving people because I have had other priorities. Right now is a great time to lay before him any and all cares and concerns I have - whether it be about the coronavirus, the election results, my health, my family, my financial situation. If there is good that I put off today, can I make a plan to do it tomorrow? Is there a person that I should encourage with God's Word? Someone I should pray for? Do it now because none of us know the day or hour when Jesus will return to judge us and there may not be a tomorrow to do these things. This is being prepared for Jesus' return to judge us all just as those wise virgins were.

Living as a Christian in the End Times, we live with two thoughts in mind. On one hand we live as if Jesus will return any minute and should honestly expect him to. And so we want to always hold before our eyes his life lived for us to fill us with his perfect deeds and his life given into death to pay and remove all our sins. But we also live as if tomorrow will come. So, we're not blowing all of our money on earthly indulgences, having nothing for tomorrow. But we are using the treasures God has entrusted to us to care for our families and others. We don't just sit at church isolating ourselves from the rest of the world so that we don't get distracted from praying. Instead, we live in this world, taking those opportunities as precious moments from God. We encourage people to connect with Christ with us, to encourage them to know how he has washed and made you and I clean today, instead of always putting it off until tomorrow.

By Christ's life given for us, lived in perfection, sacrificed on the cross, we are ready for his return to judge us – no matter the day or the hour. But since we don't know the day or hour, we seize the opportunities today to know him better, to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to be ready with us, and to share him with those who don't yet know him. This is living as the wise virgins. God help us to do so. Amen.