

Waiting for the King

Rich Nathan

August 17-18, 2013

Parables of Jesus Series

Matthew 25:1-13

In America more than any other country in the world, we want it and we want it now. If any of you are world travelers, you've probably experienced the frustration that I do as an American traveling to other places. Other places are so inconvenient. You mean, I can't get aspirin and pajamas and a bag of oranges, and snow tires at 11:00 p.m. at night from the same store? Why not? We are an instant society. We value speed over everything. We value speed over quality. We value speed over commitment. We value speed over relationships.

There is a book out called Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything by James Gleick. He has really interesting examples about how everything in contemporary society has accelerated. Do you know they even have 1-minute bed-time stories for busy parents? You can literally complete the entire bed-time story for your child in one minute. The story of Three Bears? We only got one bear – the baby bear. Hansel and Gretel? We don't need Hansel, just Gretel. Forget the Seven Dwarfs, the prince finds Snow White; he kisses her and she wakes up; they get married and live happily ever-after; The End!

You know, cutting to the chase on stories leaves a busy parent 15 seconds to pray for your son or daughter before you turn to something more valuable like Real Housewives.

Nowhere in our instant society is this more apparent than with respect to our two great national obsessions – weight loss and making money. Have you seen the titles of weight loss books? These are real titles. Listen.

- Instant Weight Loss: Open Box and Lose Nine Inches Off Your Waist!
- 60 Seconds to Weight Loss Success: One Minute Inspirations To Change Your Thinking, Your Weight, and Your Life
- Dear God Let Me Lose Fat Now, Amen.
- 8-Minutes In the Morning For Extra-Easy Weight Loss: Guaranteed to Shed Two Pounds a Week (No Equipment Required, No Calorie Counting, No Deprivation)

We Americans say: We're tired of our grandmother's advice about eating right and getting plenty of exercise. We want to lose 20 pounds and we want to do it before lunch!

And what about making money? If you punch in “get rich quick” on Amazon.com, they will give you 19,000 book titles.

Here is the one I love:

- The Automatic Millionaire: A Powerful One-Step Plan to Live and Finish Rich

One step plan? How come you don’t see any books titled:

- Ten Difficult Steps to Disciplining Yourself to Accumulate Wealth Slowly
 - Chapter 1: Stay In School As Long As You Can

You know, college grads make on average \$25,000-35,000 more every year than high school grads.

- Chapter 2: Don’t Goof Off While You Are in School
- Chapter 3: Work Hard At Your Job and Have a Great Attitude – Don’t be a Jerk?

You know, bosses love hard workers who have great attitudes.

- Chapter 4: Stop Spending Money You Don’t Have!

You want to know why some people are always in debt. For many, it may be because they spend more money than they earn.

You never see books like that!

Get Rich Quick. That’s what our government sells us with the lottery. I love our executive pastor, Craig Heselton’s line regarding the lottery. He said the lottery is the only place where your odds are winning are exactly the same if you buy a ticket, or if you don’t.

I’ve mentioned to you on several occasions that as a pastor I frequently have individuals who come to me looking for instant solutions to long-standing problems. “Pastor, I wonder if you would call my wife; she says she is leaving me. In fact, the moving van is going to be coming to our home this afternoon.” “Really? How long have you and your wife been having problems?” “Well, probably for about 20 years. I’ve had several affairs and I know I haven’t always treated her right. But I wonder if you would call her and persuade her to not leave. Do you think you could do a message on wives submitting to their husbands?”

I frequently say to you that the Christian life is a walk – right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot. We don't pole vault into change. We don't long jump into change. Changing our life is a slow, steady walk. That's why I love the book by Eugene Peterson titled:

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction by Eugene Peterson

Over the summer we've been doing a series of parables on the kingdom of God. I've expressed to you on a number of occasions that the main subject of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom? The kingdom is what life would be like in this world, if God ran everything. What would your marriage be like, if God was in control of your relationship? What would your spending habits be like? Your speech patterns? Your level of peace? What would your life be like, if God was in control? What would it be like to live in Central Ohio, if Jesus ran everything here?

Right now we don't see the kingdom of God fully manifested in our lives or in our community. We're in the position of Waiting for the King. That's the title of today's talk. Waiting for the King. Let's pray.

Matthew 25:1–13 (NIV)

“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 ones, 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. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Let's look again at vv 1-4,

Matthew 25:1–4 (NIV)

“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 ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.

The wedding of the King

We can identify the bridegroom pretty easily as Jesus the Messiah. And we can identify the ten virgins as the church. Throughout the New Testament Jesus is referred to as our bridegroom. We read these words from John the Baptist, the one who pointed to and heralded Jesus' coming, in John 3:29:

John 3:29 (NIV)

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.

Jesus calls himself the bridegroom in Matthew 9:15:

Matthew 9:15 (NIV)

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

The Christian church is called the virginal bride of Christ in 2 Cor 11:2

2 Corinthians 11:2 (NIV)

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.

And in the great ending to the Bible, the Apostle John has a vision of where all of history is going and he tells us that all of history is going to this huge wedding feast in which the church, as the virgin bride of Christ, is getting ready to meet her husband.

Revelation 21:1–4 (NIV)

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Let me just pause here and underline something for you. Do you think about your relationship with Christ as being as intimate and personal and romantic and affectionate as the love relationship between a groom and his bride? Do you say to yourself, "You know, my life is going where all of history is going – toward a great wedding feast in which I will finally be with my love, Jesus Christ?"

How different is the biblical view of the relationship of people to the Christian God compared to what all the other world religions teach. Our God, the God of the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments, calls himself the husband of his people. He is married to us, in love with us, calls us to an intimate relationship with himself. That's not something you find outside of biblical religion. There is no personal, romantic, intimate relationship between a Muslim believer and Allah. Submission, yes. Obedience, yes. But not intimacy, not affection, not romance!

There is no love relationship between a Hindu and the impersonal principle of Brahma. You don't have any romance, any intimacy, any affection with a higher power, or, indeed, with religion in general.

But this is what is offered to us in Jesus Christ – a relationship with a bridegroom.

Now, wedding customs around the world are fascinating. I really love the Ethiopian custom in which on the wedding day, after the dowry as been negotiated, the groom and 3-4 of his best men go to the bride's house. And at the bride's house, the bride's family and friends ceremonially block the entrance to the house. The groom and his best men have to sing loudly to get the bride to finally come out of the house. This prepares men for a lifetime of waiting for their wives as their wives finish up with their makeup, or giving instructions to the babysitter, or get done talking with a friend while their husband stands outside pacing and singing! It's a great wedding custom – to stand outside, groom, wait outside and sing at the top of your lungs. I love it!

In Jesus' day weddings were held in the evening. The groom and his attending party would head towards the bride's house. The bride, her bridesmaids as well as the bride's family, would come out to meet the groom. Then they would all head back in a torchlight procession to the groom's house for the wedding. Often a wedding feast might last for several days in which the whole community would come and join in. It was an opportunity for everyone in the community to have a good meal.

Now, it appears that the ten virgins are bridesmaids, who have been assisting the bride. They expect to meet the groom as he comes to the bride's house. Everyone in the procession was expected to carry his or her own torch. In this particular case, the groom is delayed.

The delay of the king

Matthew 25:5 (NIV)

The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

We spend our lives waiting for things, don't we? As children, we can't wait to be old enough to go to school and to be able to learn our ABC's. When we're in school, we can't wait for the school year to end and summer vacation to begin. We wait for high school, then we wait for acceptance letters from colleges, or to grad school. We wait to meet the right person. We wait for our wedding day, for the arrival of a child. We spend a lot of our lives waiting, don't we?

As we get older and children leave our home, many people ask themselves the question: What am I waiting for now? What meaning is left in life, if I'm no longer waiting for something other than death. Some of you feel that way. You don't know what you're waiting for.

God keeps us waiting. Here is what we read in Psalm 40:1:

Psalm 40:1 (NIV)
I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.

Now, the original Hebrew does not read:

I waited patiently for the Lord...

It literally reads:

I waited for, waited for the Lord...

I waited, waited. There is a doubling of the word "waited" for emphasis. Now, I have a fundamental assumption about life, an assumption that has grown out of four decades of Bible study, and nearly four decades of leading and caring for people in the church. My fundamental assumptions about life is that there are two primary methods that God uses to grow us into the image of his Son Jesus. God is always in the business of reshaping us, re-forming us, changing us. The two primary methods that God uses to re-form and reshape a human being are pain and waiting.

If you ask a person: When did you make a turn around, when did you decide to really turn to God and depend on him, almost always it is as a result of pain or waiting. When we are in pain; when we are waiting, we are forced to acknowledge that we are not in control of our destinies, that there is much in life that is beyond our control. It is during these periods of pain and waiting that God pries our hands open from the death grip that we have on some addiction, some idol, some bit of this creation and invites us to turn to him as our Creator and Savior. Have you seen this in your life, the difference pain and waiting have produced in you?

There is a wonderful book that I want to commend to your attention. The book is titled: Authentic Faith by Gary Thomas.

Authentic Faith by Gary Thomas

In the book Gary Thomas wonderfully explains that most Christian growth is not the result of our response to the things that we initiate, although that is a part of it. Most Christian growth is the result of things that are done to us by life and by God. Things that happen to us where we are put in the position of having to make a choice of whether or not to trust the Lord whether or not to obey him.

But my assumption about life is that waiting along with pain are the two primary tools that God uses in our lives to grow us spiritually. God in the Bible regularly keeps people waiting. And God will not be rushed.

You see it everywhere in the Bible. Abraham is 75 years old when God promises him a child in Gen.12:4 and 7

Genesis 12:4 (NIV)

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Genesis 12:7 (NIV)

The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

But God didn't give him a son immediately. Instead, he made Abram wait 25 more years before he fulfilled the promise. Genesis 17:15-17,

Genesis 17:15–17 (NIV)

God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

God made the children of Israel wait for 400 years before he took them to the Promised Land. The nation of Israel had to wait for thousands of years before their long promised Messiah finally came.

We Christians are waiting for the return of Christ, for our resurrection bodies, and for the restoration of this earth. Christians are taught to wait till you meet a follower of

Christ before you date. Christians are told to wait till marriage before you have sex. Christians are told to wait till marriage to have children.

We hate to wait. And yet, the Bible continually tells us that God will not be rushed and that one of the chief methods he uses to change us is that he makes us wait. It seems that waiting causes us to grow in ways that nothing else will.

What are you waiting on God for? Certain for most Christians, a common answer would be: "I am waiting for God to answer my prayers." One of the most frustrating places for us in our relationship with God in our instant society is that God forces us to wait for answers to prayer. We say to God: God, answer this prayer for healing and heal right this moment. God, answer this prayer for a job and make this interview the one that opens all the doors. We say: God, my teenager is going away to a Christian camp this weekend. Have this weekend be the weekend that my teenager has the big turn-around in their life. Let me see the salvation of my loved one when they attend church this Sunday! Now, there's nothing wrong with asking God to intervene at this very moment.

But God often makes us wait. And during this waiting time, the Spirit of God asks questions of you and me. We hear these questions as we slow down and listen to that still, small voice of God - questions that we can't hear, except when we are forced to wait. God speaks to our spirits and says to us: Will you continually accuse me of not caring about you because I didn't give you what you asked for, at this moment? Or not caring about your loved one? Will you continually accuse me of not being good or intending good? Will you accuse me of not existing or of being death when you pray? Will you constantly accuse me of playing games with you, promising and not delivering? Will you always accuse me of not knowing what is best for you, for this other person, or for the world?

During times of waiting, God speaks to our souls and says: Will you trust me? Can you wait on me?

The second way God often has us wait is that we are forced to wait on our own growth and change. In our instant society, we spend years pounding addictions and habits into our life and then we say to God: God, I'm ready for change; change me today. Pastors and counselors hear this all the time. "I don't know why God has not seen fit to immediately deliver me from my desire for alcohol, or the temptations I face regarding drugs, or sex, or my temper, or my sexual orientation, or my eating habits. I don't know why God has been holding back on me after I have spent decades forging a certain character. Why have I not been delivered today?"

I've got to be honest with you and tell you that churches like ours that believe in healing and believe in deliverance, churches like the Vineyard that believe in the power of God, can often become very unhealthy if our faith in the immediate intervention of God is not coupled with a constant emphasis that most change from long-standing patterns comes

about slowly and painfully. We must be ruthlessly honest here in the Vineyard and say that there are very few stories of instant deliverance from pornography addiction, or substance abuse, or eating issues or depression. When I invite you forward for prayer at the end of my messages, my intention is to get you on the road of repentance, to get you to begin the journey of change; to begin the journey of forgiving others; the journey of repentance. But it is a very rare thing for someone in five minutes to complete the entire transaction.

And churches like ours need to couple the message of healing and deliverance with a strong caution that most personal change and nearly all personal growth does not occur by the instant zap method. Most change is the result of a process where people intentionally commit themselves to the hard work of relying on God's grace and strength to help them change attitudes, or change behaviors. Christian growth is like the accumulation of wealth or weight loss. There are no easy one-step methods. That's why I appreciate organizations like AA. At least they are honest about the fact that there are going to be 12 difficult steps. And that change is probably not going to happen alone. It is going to happen in community. That kind of mindset needs to be adopted for every follower of Jesus at the Vineyard.

In this text we see that

The church is sleeping

Matthew 25:5 (NIV)

The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

There is no criticism here of the virgins because they're sleeping. It is not just the foolish virgins who are sleeping; the wise ones were also asleep. But I think this points to the fact that there are two kinds of sleep that we human beings engage in. There is the sleep of the foolish and the sleep of the wise. The sleep of the foolish is the sleep of the exhausted, who have spent their waking moments in frenzied, anxious, nervous activity trying to bring about happiness in their lives on their own. The sleep of the foolish is the sleep of the exhausted person, who believes that everything in life is entirely up to them – their strategies, their efforts, their plans, and their activities. So the foolish person collapses in bed after filling their life with nervous busyness or a variety of escapes – television and computer games, empty relationships and addictions.

The sleep of the wise is completely different. The wise sleep well and sleep peacefully because they know the end of the story.

What is the end of the story? Here's what we read in 2 Corinthians 4:17 where Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 4:17 (NIV)

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

This verse doesn't mean that your present circumstances don't hurt a lot. It doesn't mean that you don't shed real tears or experience real grief right now because of a loved one's sickness or death, because of relational or financial or personal issues. But our knowledge of the future sets our tears and our grief in a context of enormous hope. Let me explain what I mean.

Let's say that you are going through a difficult patch with one of your children right now. Maybe you are encountering incredible teenage rebellion. The relationship with your child is very strained. They are lying to you and they are using drugs. They are sexually active. Maybe your child has gotten involved with a really bad crowd. They've gone off in a bad direction. But if you knew that this was just a season that your child would turn fully to Christ, that your child would turn out to live for Jesus and to love Jesus with all their hearts when they got to adulthood, it would be a lot easier to go through your present time with peace and with joy.

Maybe you discover a weird lump or growth. Maybe the doctor has discovered a tumor in your breast or your uterus, or one of your glands. You are going in for some tests. If you knew that it was all going to work out; if you knew the results of the test ahead of time, that it was going to be nothing, wouldn't you be able to experience peace and joy right now?

The stock market might crash. It crashed before. Investors could start leaping out of Wall Street windows, if they could get them open. What if you knew that the stock market would not only rebound, but double or triple in the next three years; that the economic downturn was just temporary.

See, this is Paul's argument. We can sleep peacefully if you know that whatever you are going through can be endured, more than endured, it can be triumphed over when you have the end in view, when you know what's coming, when you have hope that God's kingdom will win in the end!

It is not just because we know that God will work everything out in the end. But there is another reason the Christian can sleep peacefully. We don't have to engage in frenzied, anxious activity because we also know that both in our own lives, and in the lives of loved ones concerning their ultimate health and success there is only one person who is indispensable, that person is God. We know that if you rest, or if I rest, if you let go, or I let go, God will keep things going. What keeps the world going right now is not our activity. It is not luck that our lives continue on. What keeps the world going is God. Do you know this one? That you are not indispensable, that no one is.

I love the parable of the growing seed in Mark 4 where Jesus says:

Mark 4:26–28 (NIV)

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

You know, some of the most anxious people are Christians, who do not understand how the kingdom of God comes into this world. The kingdom in the Bible is always God’s kingdom. The kingdom of God refers to God’s reign. It’s what life will be like when God is in control. Christians talk loosely about expanding the kingdom, or spreading the kingdom. But the Bible never uses those terms concerning our relationship to God’s kingdom. We don’t bring the kingdom of God in. The Bible says we inherit the kingdom. We receive the kingdom. We preach the kingdom. We proclaim the kingdom. We wait for the kingdom. We enter the kingdom. We’re given the kingdom. All of the verbs the Bible uses concerning our relationship to the kingdom are responsive verbs. We never bring about the kingdom. God brings his kingdom.

Whether the man wakes or sleeps the kingdom of God continues. Whether we wake or sleep the world continues. Our world, the world of your loved ones, this community, the planet we live on – its God who holds everything together. That’s why we can sleep.

It’s like what the great Reformer, Martin Luther, once said in reference to God’s control. He said:

While I sit here sipping my little Wittenberg Beer, the kingdom of God is marching on.

With me, without me, I sleep in the knowledge that this world was going on long before I was born and this world will continue to go on long after I return to the dust. And I’m simply a name on some tombstone in some old cemetery. I am not indispensable. So as a wise person, I can sleep.

The parable not only tells us about the delay of the king, but also,

The arrival of the King

Matthew 25:6 (NIV)

“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

The king suddenly arrives at midnight. This text says at midnight the cry rang out. Midnight in the Bible is always the time of sudden, unexpected events. The tenth plague strikes every Egyptian home at midnight. When Paul and Silas were in the

Philippian jail singing and praising God, an earthquake struck the jail at midnight. Midnight is the time of the unexpected arrival of the bridegroom.

Jesus tells us in Mark 13 that he will return to this world at any time and then he says, "Even at midnight." Midnight is an image of sudden, unexpected activity. The return of Christ in the Bible is always referred to as sudden and unexpected. The images that are used concerning the return of Christ speaks to us about the suddenness of his arrival. Christ's return is described as being like a thief in the night, the sudden flood in the days of Noah, a master returning after a long journey back to his estate. The return of Christ is accompanied by a trumpet blast sounding in the middle of the night.

Suddenness, surprise, dealing with the unexpected is always the test of Christian faith. One 19th century pastor said:

A man has only as much Christianity as he can command in sudden trial.

Its always in moments of surprise when we face the unexpected that we get a true measure of our own spirituality. Certainly, temptation doesn't typically announce itself so that we can brace ourselves to resist. We suddenly find ourselves in situations where we are tempted to lie, or tempted to be covetous or envious. A particular irritation, or aggravating situation suddenly arises and tempts us to be angry, or to respond in kind. Unexpected temptation and trial are always the test of our spiritual maturity. Our overall spiritual health and our connection to Christ prepares us to handle temptation.

It is not just temptation that comes suddenly and unexpectedly, so does death.

I want to read to you an excerpt of a letter by a great Christian man named Jonathan Edwards. He wrote to his son on the occasion of one of his son's friend's death. And I want to note at the front end that Jonathan Edwards, that his son was only 9 years old. Edwards had sent his 9 year old son out to a frontier village away from him and his wife, so that his 9 year old son could learn an American Indian dialect. This was in 1755. He sent his 9 year old away from home so that his son could learn a Indian dialect so that later on, his son could learn to be a missionary to an Indian tribe. And this is what Edwards writes, he says:

Dear child, though you are a great way off from us, yet you are not out of our minds, I am full of concern for you, often think of you and often pray for you. Though you are at so great a distance from us and from all your relationships, yet this is a comfort to us that the same God that is here is also at Anahawkguaha, [the Indian village where he was] and though you are out of sight and out of our reach, you are always in Gods hands, who is infinitely gracious.

Parents listen to this. My child, though you are out of our sight and out of our reach, you are always in God's hands who is infinitely gracious, and we can go to Him and commit you to His care and mercy. And here is Edwards' counsel to a 9 year old.

Take heed that you don't forget or neglect [God]. Always set God before your eyes and live in His fear, and seek Him every day with all diligence. For He and He only can make you miserable or happy as He pleases, and your life and health and the eternal salvation of your soul, and all in this life and all that is to come depends on His will and good pleasure.

Now, listen to the way Edwards reports the death of his son's friends.

This week before last on Thursday, David died, whom you knew and used to play with, and who was your friend and who used to live at our house. His soul has gone into the eternal world. Whether he was prepared for death, we don't know. But we know that this was a loud call of God to you, to prepare you for death. You can see my son that those that are young die, as well as those who are old. Your friend David was not very much older than you. Remember what Christ said, that you must be born again or you can never see the Kingdom of God. Never give yourself any rest until you have good evidence that you are converted and became a new creation. We hope that God will preserve your life and health, and will return you to us again and in safety. But always remember that life is uncertain, you know not how soon you must die, and therefore, you need to be ready.

What a different world we live in. In the 21st century we do everything to prevent our children from ever thinking about death. We ourselves don't ever want to think about death and so we face death so unprepared. And our children face death – the death of a family member, friends, their own deaths unprepared.

Temptation comes suddenly, death comes suddenly. But do you know what else comes suddenly? The kingdom. In his book Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairytale, Frederick Buechner says:

SLIDE

People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains, but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian, but not for the marriage supper of the Lamb, and when the bridegroom finally arrives at midnight, they turn up with their lamps to light him on his way, only to find they've forgotten the oil to light them with.

Isn't that true of us, friends? Sometimes the most bitter regrets we have is not because we weren't prepared for the worst – for temptation, or for death – but because we weren't prepared for the best. We miss golden opportunities because we weren't prepared for them. And we often miss opportunities to connect with God because when God comes we are not ready. So often in our lives God is knocking at the door, unexpectedly. He suddenly shows up. Here's an opportunity for you to share your faith. Here's an opportunity for you to pray for that person. Here's an opportunity for you to experience more of me. Here is an opportunity for you to finally connect with me after being around church and Christianity for years.

God says: Here is a golden opportunity, but we are not in the frame of mind to seize it. A person is practically banging down the door asking us how can they be saved and we're too busy working on another report, or cooking another meal, or spinning inside of our own heads to welcome the kingdom when it comes.

Finally, in this text we see:

The church is sustained

Matthew 25:7–9 (NIV)

“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.’

When things suddenly happen, whether bad or good, it is too late to get prepared. After the hurricane comes, it's too late to buy supplies. The stores are all empty. After the World Trade Center was hit by two planes, it was too late to connect the dots of the terrorists who plotted to attack America. After the kingdom draws near and the door is slammed on us, it is too late then to embrace the bridegroom.

I told you earlier that the groom would be met in a torchlight procession. In Jesus' day there would be long sticks wrapped with rags that were soaked in oil. Typically, the torch would go out in 15 minutes, and so people would carry a flask of oil and other rags to wrap the stick with. What is the oil that we must continually be supplied with? Let me close with this thought.

Jesus doesn't tell us what the oil is. Certainly, it could be symbol of the Holy Spirit and our need to be continually filled with the Spirit. Let me suggest one other thing that we Christians must be continually supplied with otherwise the oil will be consumed – that is, prayer. For the Christian who does not set aside to pray daily, the oil of your life will be consumed and you will find yourself standing in the dark. The oil supply of our prayer quickly runs out and there is only one way to be prepared for sudden,

unexpected events as we wait for the King. We must cultivate in our lives a vital connection with God through prayer.

There is no other way. It is not enough to know a lot about God. You are not prepared for bad or good if you are not linked to God in prayer. So many folks say, "Pastor, I really don't know how to pray well. I don't know how to replenish the oil supply of my torch so that I don't find myself suddenly standing in the dark." I've put on my website:

www.richnathan.org

three simple ways for you to pray on a daily basis. One is to follow the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done..." I've given some suggestion about how to pray slowly through each phrase of the Lord's Prayer to really connect with God.

A second suggestion that I've made on my website is to pray through what is called The Litany of the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer. Each of the phrases in the Litany serve as great fuel for your prayers.

A third thing that I've done to encourage my own prayer life is to keep a little prayer journal listing my prayers. I went to Barnes and Noble and got a little moleskin book that I can put in my pocket, or in my briefcase. I write down in the book the names of people that I'm praying for, situations that I'm praying about. I record the date when I began to pray for that person. And underneath I record how God answered that prayer. It is a great encouragement to create a prayer list.

The king is coming. And as we wait we need to prepare ourselves for his arrival by keeping our torch of prayer lit. Let's pray.

Waiting for the King

Rich Nathan

August 17-18, 2013

Parables of Jesus Series

Matthew 25.1-13

- I. The wedding of the King
- II. The delay of the King
 - A. The church is sleeping
- III. The arrival of the King
 - A. The church is supplied