

“The Steward’s Purpose Letting Your Light Shine!”

Matthew 25:1-13, Stewardship Sermon 2

November 9, 2014

I am very grateful that when David Buck, the Chairman of our Stewardship Board, spoke to us last Sunday morning that he quoted those magnificent words of St. Paul in Ephesians 5: *“Look carefully how you walk then, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is!”* (Ephesians 5:15-16). These words of St. Paul certainly tie in very beautifully for us with **that rather stern parable** Jesus teaches us about the ten virgins in our Gospel lesson; five of whom were foolish and five of whom were wise!

Some people might see this parable **centering primarily on the unfortunate incident** of an **oil crisis** and oil crises are certainly nothing new! There are probably many people here today who can remember very vividly the **oil crisis** that took place in the **USA in 1973**, when the members of **OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries)** programed an oil embargo in response to the U.S. decision to resupply the Israeli military during the Yom Kippur war; an oil crisis that began in **October 1973** until March of 1974. The biggest impact this 1973 oil crisis had on the American public is twofold: There were some **very long lines** at the **gasoline pumps** and the decision of the Congress to change the **speed limit** on all **Interstate Highways** from **70 mph to 55 mph**.

(1) You could say that this parable deals primarily with the terrible tragedy of an oil crisis—an oil crisis at midnight!,

(2) Or we could use it as a platform to speak about the problem of being stingy and not sharing! Some may ask: “Why didn’t the five wise virgins share their oil supply with the five foolish virgins? For after all, isn’t this what Jesus is constantly teaching us as his disciples, **not to be stingy but to share with others what we have?** In Matthew 5:40 we hear our Lord Jesus say: *“And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse from the one who would borrow from you!”* (Matthew 5:40-41).

(3) It could be tempting for a preacher like me to simply reduce it to its moral implications on your need to constantly be prepared for whatever comes along in life. *“Semper paratis”* is a Latin phrase that means **“Always Prepared”** and is the motto of the United States Coast Guard.

But for me to do any of those things would be to do a great injustice to this text. That’s why I’d like for us to look at this **parable from its intended use.** This parable comes right in the **middle of St. Matthew’s Gospel** account; **chapters 24 and 25**; that theologians call our Lord’s great **“eschatological” discourse.** **Eschatology** has to do with the **study of “the last things.”** Both of these chapters repeatedly emphasize the need of our constantly being prepared at all times **FOR THE COMING OF THE HEAVENLY BRIDEGROOM, OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST.** As all **ten of the virgins were under an obligation to be well-prepared** to meet the bridegroom, so all those who profess faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, should be ready to receive him when he **ushers in the kingdom of heaven in all its fullness at his glorious return.** The picture provided at the outset of this parable is that the groom, who is on his way to his parent’s home, according to the custom in that day, where he would meet the bride, signifying that the festivities should begin. This was the actual wedding ceremony and the great reception—that often lasted a whole week—would follow. **The ten girls are alike in so many ways: (1) All intended to meet the bridegroom** and to escort him to the place where the wedding would take place. (2) Each of them **had lamps.** (3) All were **expecting the bridegroom to arrive** before another day would begin, but none of them knew at what specific time he would be arriving. (4) All of them were **looking forward to taking place in the marriage feast.** (5) And similarly, when the bridegroom lingers, **all these ten girls fall asleep;** a sleep from which they are suddenly aroused (vv. 5-6).

But though these ten girls are **similar in so many ways, their dissimilarity is even more striking.** It is basic. It is what really counts. Five were foolish. Five were wise. The foolishness of the first group consisted in the fact that they were **totally unprepared to meet the bridegroom;** for though they had taken lamps along with them, they weren't using it wisely by trimming their wicks before the bridegroom arrives, nor did they bring an extra supply of oil with them (v. 3)! **They had lamps but they had no oil.** They were careless, not forward-looking, but each one was guilty of an **inexcusable and senseless neglect!** Maybe this is why the **ANCHOR BIBLE** translates the Greek this way, calling five of them **"silly"** and five of them **"sensible."**

This story that had such a happy beginning ends sadly! And there is no getting away from this! Five of the girls, when push came to shove, were totally unprepared. They had taken no oil with them. Their cry came at midnight, **"Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"** But when they trimmed their lamps, they couldn't help but notice their lamps were going out. And friends, if you are still worried about the fact that the other five should have shared, Jesus would have answered your concerns like this: **"I am not telling you what they should have done! I am telling you what they actually did! So just be quiet and listen to the rest of the story!"**

We read in verse 10: **"And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut.** Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us!' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour!"

"The door was shut!" In these four words lie the tragedy and the point of the parable. We may not like what we heard. We may not like the thought at all, but there is no doubt that Jesus believed and that it is impossible to miss out totally on the **JOYFUL EXPERIENCE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.** And incidentally, our Lord often compares the kingdom of heaven, quite often, not to a funeral or anything that is sad and morose, but to a joyous wedding feast! It's possible to be so silly and so slack that when the critical moment arrives...the door is shut. Matthew ends the parable with the grim picture of the sill virgins hammering at the door: **"Lord, lord, open to us!"** And the answer is, **"Truly I tell you, I do not know you!" (Vv. 11-12)**

Do you remember those other very important words of Jesus? **"Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven!" (Matthew 7:21).** When St. Matthew wrote his Gospel, the infant church was expecting at any time the imminent return of the Lord to judge the living and the dead. A constant theme for people then and now is **that Christians out to live out their lives always in the light of eternity; ready as if Christ should return at any single moment. And that's not a SAD THOUGHT!** For the Bible says when that happens, then: **"You are to lift up your heads and rejoice, because your redemption draws near!"** Think of the most exciting wedding feat that you have ever been at, where you had the most fun, the most excitement and the most joy. The kingdom of heaven is like that wedding feast. We are to hold ourselves in constant readiness, everyone for that moment, when the silly, the careless, the worldly-minded, when those not clinging to God in Christ will be shut out. We are supposed to be prepared, never just walking through life and **"winging"** it as some people used to say.

The great difference between the wise virgins and the foolish virgins is that the wise have EXTRA OIL WITH THEM while the foolish do not! The wise ones are therefore prepared for a possible delay in the coming of the bridegroom.

When I was a boy I remember my **mom or dad driving into the filling station,** as we called them. They'd drive the car over that rubber hose that had a bell inside of it, somehow, that would ring, and then out of the gas station office an attendant would come, those were the days in the early 60s when my parents had bought a brand new eight-cylinder **FORD CUSTOM CAR in 1955.** My dad told me he paid \$800 cash for that very fine car. The gasoline attendant would not only fill up the tank with fuel, he would also always wash the front windshields on both side, and then ask the driver a routine question: "Check your

oil?” Without a sufficient reserve of oil in the crankcase, the engine would have soon been a goner. I remember my dad telling me how important it was to check the oil. I wonder if there is anyone here who ever had to learn that lesson the hard way, or burn up your lawnmower prematurely because you forgot to put in the oil?

And how do we prepare? We keep **OIL ON HAND, AND OIL IS SIMPLY FAITH—FAITH ALONE!** This needs to be the deep agenda of every Christian life and God gives it to us freely. And it's out of that faith that works come! So many people think of the Christian life in terms of a **funeral rather than a wedding because they are trying to work their way into heaven**, and for them, it is just **drudgery**. But not when you have faith. So how do we commend works when there is not a **carrot and stick economy?** When you don't get **merit badges or brownie points** for a good performance?

It's not easy, but it's not difficult either. When you get your grounding as Martin Luther taught in *sola fide*, faith alone! Faith alone announced that God has switched from a merit badge economy with sinners to one of forgiveness. And the **CENTRAL FIGURE IS ALWAYS THE HEAVENLY BRIDEGROOM, CHRIST ALONE!** Not that we are simply to imitate him and take our mandate from him, instead of from Moses, although that would not be bad, but far better to comprehend that all my personal needs are met in that which Christ did for me...and because of what Christ did for you! We are now able for the first time able to **freely devote ourselves to the burning needs of other people**, and to do so **100% with lamps burning brightly.**

Didn't Jesus also say this in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:16? *“Let your light so shine before others, that seeing your good works, they may glorify the Father in heaven because of you!”* And yet ours is only a **reflected light. Our sun is the source of that beautiful light** of that full moon that has been shining brightly this past week shines in our direction. Jesus is our source of light and we are to reflect that light to others. In **John 8:12**, he says: *“I am the light of the world and the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life!”* In **I Peter 2:9**, the apostle writes: *“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the wonderful deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light!”* In **Ephesians 5:8-9**, Paul writes: *“For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of the light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth!”*

Certainly one of the steward's primary purposes in life is – to keep our lights burning – for the sake of others and not just our own!

I don't know how many people here follow the sport of **Professional Golf to any degree, even though I do know we have a lot of amateur golfers who are members of Mount Olive who often enjoy golfing together.**

Even if you know very little about golf, you may have heard that a man named that **Payne Stewart** who was considered to be one of best golfers in the history of the game, **who died in a terrible plane crash back in 1999.** His memorial service was broadcast on television—with a **gigantic focus on a joyful celebration of the hope of eternal life he shared with all true believers**—and a gigantic focus also was placed on his own **great personal sense of thanksgiving—he seemed to carry with him everywhere he went along with the joy of heaven!**

For **Payne Stewart**, he knew before he died that his death had been swallowed up in victory (*I Thessalonians 4:13-18*) Shortly after **Mr. Payne's funeral**, the news was leaked to the press by someone at the Baptist Church where he was a member that he had given \$1.4 million in tithes and offerings to his local church in that year before he died. Such an example might remind us that one of the most important ways,

among the many ways that we might let our light shine, is by saying what we believe to be true about our awesome God with the holy stuff of money. Payne Stewart's checkbook told the world clearly what was really important to him in his life!

This observation reminds me also of another stewardship story I love to tell that I have told some years back, from this pulpit, probably a couple of times, I am sure, though others here may not have heard it. It's about a fifty old daughter who received an official message from a Swiss Bank in Switzerland that her elderly father 80 years old with a very weak heart had a distant cousin die and was leaving her father \$2 million. The daughter afraid to tell her father this news for fear that because of his very weak heart it might kill him. So she went to the pastor and asked him for advice. He says, "I know precisely how to handle this situation! Leave everything to me!" So the pastor made a call on the elderly man to give him communion. And when their celebration was complete, he said to the elderly man: "Hey Rudy, you know what hypothetical situation is, don't you? Well, let's just suppose, let's just support that you had a distant relative in Europe you died unbeknownst to you and you learned that he left you \$2 million, what would you do?"

"That's easy!" Rudy said. "I'd give it to the church!" And that's when the pastor himself had a heart attack and died!

Well on a more serious note, I was reading a book on Christian stewardship two weeks ago and the author pointed out what he liked to call three different way of practicing Christian stewardship, when it comes to offering monetary gifts to God through his Church. He said there is: **(1) Grudge giving; (2) Drudge giving; and (3) Thanks giving!** The difference may be discerned in the three different ways that some members of the church receive their annual pledge card, which here at Mount Olive is always a matter strictly between the member of this Church and God. Though we ask you to turn it in as a sealed pledge this coming November 23, it will never be opened by anyone here at the church, but if the world is still spinning are still alive in November 2015, it will be given back to you!

If you practice grudge giving the sentiments you may be feeling when you receive that pledge card in the mail is to say to yourself: "Oh, no! Here we go again! Money, money, money! That's all this church ever seems to talk about," though a statement like that would certainly be far from the truth! "What right do they have to invade my private life, with a request like that? I've got bills to pay. I've got places to go! I've got things to buy. I attend worship 1/3 of the time and on those Sundays I always drag my kids to Sunday school. I usher six times a year! What more do they want? And if money is such a big deal, how come they spend so much on the mailing out of those three Stewardship letters to my home every year? I guess I'll just have to fill out this stupid pledge card, just to get them off my back!" That, my friends, is grudge giving! They type of giving that is built upon resentment. And, did you notice that somehow when they use the word "they," when they are speaking at other members at the church they never use that word as including themselves?

A second response might go something like this! You get your pledge card in the mail and say to yourself: "Oh, no! It's that time of the year again. Boy do I hate it when these stewardship mailings come to my home! They make me feel so guilty! I know that I should be more generous, because it is my DUTY as a good Christian to support the programs at Mount Olive Church where I attend. The Bible says that I should give and the Bible says that relatively wealthy people should give more and do their best to set a good example to encourage others. I know that raising my pledge is the thing I should and ought to do. So I'll force myself to do it, but the pastor at my church at other lay leaders better appreciate the sacrifice for me this represents!" This, my friends, is an example of drudge giving!

A third possible way to give actually has very little to do with money itself. The envelope arrives in the mail, and you say to yourself: "Oh good, this must be my annual pledge card! This gives me another chance to respond to all the goodness in my life the Lord has blessed me with! He has blessed me with a wonderful family, a good profession that I enjoy, satisfying work and a beautiful autumn season. He has blessed me with a body and a mind and soul that should continue to grow and stretch out into and enjoy God's world!"

The Bible reminds us: **"The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For, he has founded it upon the seas, and established it!" (Psalm 24:1)** I am so grateful for all of the fullness of my life, for he goodness of God's generosity to me and to this world! But above all else, I am thankful for my Lord and

Savior Jesus Christ, who has brought to me the forgiveness of all my sins, and made me certain of heaven through his dying and rising again. Maybe through my faithful giving I can reflect that love and care to others, and help to prepare others for the great and final day too! You know, it's only in being prepared for that day that we are truly prepared for all of the other many mini-crises, or judgments, if you please, that befall us in life too!

May God grant that to every one of you for Jesus sake, who says to every one of us again today as his blood-bought disciples: ***“Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day, nor the hour!”*** Amen