

INTRODUCTION | THE NEED TO KEEP WATCH

The application Jesus gives us in this morning's passage is clear. **Verse 13, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."**

There would be no need for us to keep watch unless there were things to dull us, weary us and cause us danger. I don't naturally gravitate to watching the news because I find it very quickly becomes the same old story: crimes are committed, people are hurt and harmed, disaster strikes and there's cash to give away! Maybe that's a particular morning news show.

Do you find yourself wearied by all the concerns of life? There are ways we try to avoid our anxieties, and Ed exposed the dangers and evils of one last week: gambling. We are well aware there are more. But these only lead to disappointment and estrangement from God and others. Jesus knows. Jesus has the antidote. "Keep watch."

So the question arising from this passage I think is also clear: What does it therefore mean to "keep watch"?

In chapters 24-25 of Matthew's Gospel Jesus has been speaking to his disciples about the timing and manner of his return and Judgment Day. Since chapter 24 verse 36 Jesus has focussed on the timing of his return. Including today's parable Jesus repeats the same application three times. **Chapter 24 verse 42, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Verse 44, "So you must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."**

So when we get to chapter 25 we find Jesus repeating the same chorus in **verse 13, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."** He really wants us to get that the timing of his return cannot be predicted.

Furthermore, in chapter 24 verses 36-51 the focus has been on the possibility of Jesus' return coming *sooner than expected*. While here in chapter 25 verses 1-13 the focus shifts to the possibility of Jesus' return delaying *longer than expected*.

So then, what does it mean to "keep watch" in view of the *delay* of Jesus' return? I think Jesus gives us clues in the details of this parable. But in short Jesus is saying, being ready for the delay of his return takes **wisdom**.

So what does this kind of wisdom look like? Two things: a shift in perspective and preparation. We'll look at these in turn.

The master story-teller that he is, Jesus follows a simple structure to this parable: the three 'C's of cast, complication and consequences. We'll follow each in turn. My aim will be to spend most of our time on the final point as we consider the application for ourselves.

THE CAST

Verse 1: When Jesus returns the kingdom of heaven will be like a joyful wedding celebration. This parable doesn't depict the kingdom now, but the kingdom to come when Jesus returns. As Christians we look ahead in anticipation and longing for this great day of celebration and feasting.

We're introduced to ten virgins with lamps. The word translated in our NIV Bibles as "virgin" could simply refer to a young woman of marriageable age. They are not for the bridegroom, but joining the village celebrations of his new marriage to his bride, who is absent in this scenario. But it would be reasonable of us to assume she's in the picture somewhere.

Back to the young women. They're preparing for the banquet, but evidently preparations could take a while – hence the lamps. Half of them are wise and half are foolish. From the get-go we're meant to identify with the wise ones, knowing that it's not going to end well for the foolish ones – it never does. What's the difference? The wise ones bring reserves of oil to keep their lamps burning while the foolish ones haven't.

But why? They appear to be rather blasé about their preparations. Perhaps they're not approaching the wedding nor the bridegroom with the seriousness and respect they deserve.

But key for us at this point, is to recognise that the kingdom of heaven, Jesus' kingdom, will on the final Day, be like preparing for the most joyful celebration of the most intimate relationship. Jesus elsewhere identifies himself with the bridegroom and his people as the bride. It will be the most glorious Day of celebration when the bridegroom finally comes face to face with his bride. A shift in perspective. A call to prepare.

THE COMPLICATION

Jesus brings in the complication in **verse 5: "The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep."**

We could go as far as to say that the thing that proves the undoing of the foolish ones is the timing of the bridegroom's coming. If he arrived sooner rather than later the foolish ones may well have made it into the banquet by the short light of their lamps.

Again, this is a parable depicting what it will be like when Jesus returns. His delay not only means salvation for those who have not yet bowed the knee to him. It could also spell disaster for those who end up wandering and walking away from him. But, again, we have no control over his timing. His timing is ultimately a matter for the Father's plan which he'll reveal to the Son in due course.

But the prospect of Jesus' delay could spell danger and disaster for us if we don't approach that Day with the respect and seriousness it deserves. Will his delay spell disaster for me, or will my shift in perspective enable me to prepare for that Day and receive it, whenever it comes, with joy?

THE CONSEQUENCES

Verse 6: "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"

The consequences for the ten young women is revealed. The wise ones have taken into account the possibility of delay and have made the necessary preparations. The foolish ones evidently didn't prepare as they ought. So while the foolish ones go off to buy more oil, the bridegroom comes to meet the others and they head altogether off to the wedding banquet. They go in and they shut the door.

At this point we're meant to wonder what will happen to the foolish young women. Surely they're just going to be a little late? But when they arrive they'll be let in?

We read in *verse 11*, “*Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’* But he replies, *‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’*”

How did we get from bridegroom to ‘Lord, Lord’? Simply a sign of respect? Or perhaps Jesus is reminding us of what he said back at the end of his sermon on the mount (**Matthew 7:21-23**), where he said:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers!’”

The ending to Jesus’ parable is a shocking twist. We think, “Surely he could just let them in.” They were only a little late. They only made the mistake of not bringing enough oil. How trivial is that?

But we fail to see the seriousness and finality of the Day Jesus returns. That day will be the final nail in the coffin, the final mark, the final score, the final assessment of your life and accomplishments. No further word will be said about the short life we have lived on this earth.

But that Day might take longer than expected to come. So being ready for the delay of Jesus’ return takes wisdom.

So we note, firstly, that **wisdom takes a dramatic shift in perspective.**

The foolish young women didn’t approach the banquet with the level of respect it deserved. They thought, “It’ll be fine. When the time comes I can just do what I need then. I’ll use some of the oil from the others.” But such an attitude betrays a fundamental lack of respect of the bridegroom and the glory of the event.

Do you think that if someone told them, “This wedding banquet is going to be the greatest and best and final wedding banquet to end all banquets,” that they would’ve got themselves into gear, made the necessary preparations and got in? Perhaps.

But Jesus’ point is clear: Don’t put off preparing for the Day of his return!

I am prone to leaving things to the last minute, whether assessments, exam preparations or Christmas shopping. I always seem to get to this time of the year and think, “Next year we’re not going to leave our Christmas shopping to December.” But here we are in December again already and there is plenty of Christmas shopping to be done.

We can apply this mentality to our relationship with Jesus. There are always other things we can tend to, prioritise and be distracted by. Life is reduced to the rat race, the hum-drum, the daily grind. Meanwhile tending to our relationship with Jesus gets pushed back further and we put it off. We tell ourselves, “I’ll get to God, I’ll get to Jesus, eventually. But first I need to sort out my career, my relationships or my lifestyle. Then I’ll get to Jesus.”

Do you see what Jesus is saying to us when we take such an approach to him? Don’t put it off! Responding to Jesus is the single-most important decision we will ever make. It’s consequences are too serious to ignore. It’s glory is too great to miss out on. It’s timing is too unpredictable to put it off.

Secondly, we note that **wisdom takes a commitment to preparation.**

For all of us, the timing of Jesus' return will in the end expose the difference between who are his true disciples and who were only kidding themselves. Jesus' true disciples will take both the urgent and long-term approach. They'll see that the decision to follow Jesus has to be made today. But that the decision to follow Jesus is also a daily decision to follow him in the face of many potential distractions, difficulties and other good things that could render them ineffective, cause their straying from Jesus and in the end keep them out of the great wedding banquet at the end of human history.

When it comes to preparation we must plan the work and then work the plan. We can think, "But I just want to get into the headspace where it all happens naturally, organically. So it's not so much of a struggle." If only. Our habits shape our hearts. We are inherently selfish. We live in a culture that avoids pain at all costs in the pursuit of pleasure at every opportunity. In the changing and challenging times of life our habits can keep us grounded. Show me your schedule and I'll show you your priorities. Daily habits expose the direction of our hearts.

If we truly want to follow through with the priority of our relationship with Jesus we put his family, Bible reading, small groups, ministry commitments, 1-2-1 catch ups into the calendar. We consider their worth. We calendarise it, and we commit to it. We prayerfully consider how we might *actually* make it work. The apology becomes the exception, not the norm.

I realise I'm possibly speaking more to my generation at this point. We are notorious for putting off our RSVP's, and being afraid to make commitments. But when we truly see the value of a cause, we give it our all. There is no better offer than to build our lives on the glorious kingdom of God, to play our part in his eternal purposes, and to see lives transformed by Jesus – including our own. He is the most wonderful and gracious Saviour.

CONCLUSION | THE SLEEP OF PREPARATION

Keeping watch, really, then is more an attitude than a series of activities. For, if we truly grasped how great and glorious a salvation Jesus offers us, and how great and terrible the thought of missing out actually is, then we would begin each day in joyful, prayerful anticipation of his coming.

And, like the wise young women of today's parable, when we're prepared we can sleep peacefully knowing in the end all will be well.