

Matthew 25:1-13

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Date: 28 July 2015

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[0 : 00] And there are few worse things, aren't there, than being late. Being late for something, it's a really embarrassing thing, isn't it? And I remember a few weeks ago, well it's actually a couple of years ago now, when my mum was down in London, visiting Emma and I to have a bit of a tourist trip round London.

We wanted to really treat her, take her round the sights. And the time came when she had to leave, she had to get back on the train to go back up to Chester, get on the train at Euston.

So we booked her a nice lunch, we had lunch with her, and we really got into this lunch. And after a while, time sort of ran away with us. We lost track of time.

And we realised that we had to get mum to this train, we rushed across London to get to Euston.

We ran across Euston Station Concourse and got to the platform, but the gates had been shut.

It was too late. We pleaded with the officials, please, let us on the train, let us on the platform. But they said, no, the gate has been shut. It's too late.

[1 : 12] And we'd missed the train. It was really, really embarrassing. Being too late is an awful thing, isn't it? But being too late is what is the main thing in this passage, isn't it, from Jesus, this parable.

Ten virgins, or bridesmaids, are invited to a wedding party, and some of them get there in time, don't they, in verse 10. Those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast and the door was shut.

But for others, they were too late. The doors are shut, and they're left out. They're too late. And this parable that Jesus tells in Matthew chapter 25 is a parable to show us what his kingdom is like.

Did you see that in verse 1? Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven will be like this parable. Jesus is saying in this parable, my kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, is about to appear in its fullest sense to everybody.

But the moral of the story is at the end of the parable, isn't it, in verse 13. He says, watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

[2 : 33] My kingdom is going to arrive, it's going to appear, but you need to be ready. Don't get your timings mixed up. Don't be too late when my kingdom arrives.

As we think about this parable, I just want to talk about three things that this parable shows us about Jesus' kingdom. The first thing is that Jesus' kingdom brings delight.

Jesus' kingdom brings delight. We see that in verse 1, I think, don't we? Jesus uses the image of a wedding to describe his kingdom.

Verse 1, the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. This is delightful, isn't it, this image.

Being part of Jesus' kingdom is a happy thing. It's a delightful thing. The picture Jesus uses is of a wedding day.

[3 : 43] The happiest day that you can imagine. And these virgins, these young girls, are invited as bridegroom's attendants.

So they're probably going to escort the bridegroom to the wedding day. They've got these lamps to lead him in a kind of procession. They've received VIP invitations to the best party of the year, haven't they?

There's going to be food and wine and laughing and good times. The perfect day. Sometimes I like to play a game with myself in my head and it's called my perfect day.

My perfect day is a game where you can imagine what your perfect day is going to be. You can write it down or you can just go through it in your head if you want. And you can go crazy.

You can dream really, really big. I wonder if you were to play my perfect day, where would you be on your perfect day? Who would you be with?

[4 : 52] On a tropical island? In a penthouse overlooking Florence? On a five-star cruise? On your perfect day? What would you have for breakfast on your perfect day?

Just imagine it. What would you do in the morning? Then what would you do for lunch? Then afternoon? All the way till the evening? And then where would you sleep on your perfect day? It's a great game to play.

But Jesus, by choosing this image of a wedding feast to describe his kingdom and his presence, he is saying to us, doesn't he, if your perfect day doesn't include Jesus, if it doesn't include the bridegroom, it won't be perfect.

It will be far from perfect. Think of your perfect day, just get that in your mind. But Jesus says to us, just you wait. Just you wait for this wedding.

Without me, you're not dreaming big enough. Jesus describes his kingdom as a wedding feast. It's just as delightful, as the most perfect day that you can ever imagine.

[6 : 07] It is the most delightful experience to be with the bridegroom, with Jesus. And these young women, they know that, don't they? They've been invited to the most delightful events they can possibly imagine.

And we should be looking forward to that, shouldn't we? We should be looking forward to the day when Jesus' kingdom will be revealed. It will be a delightful kingdom.

We can be optimistic people, can't we? Because of the delight that is ahead of us in the future. We can live today for Jesus because we have a delightful tomorrow.

A perfect day forever with Jesus. So, whatever it is you imagine, Jesus says to us, just wait. Just you wait for this perfect day, for the bridegroom to appear.

It is delightful. It is delightful. But, the second thing in this parable, and I think this is where we really get into the meat of the passage. Even though Jesus' kingdom is delightful, it is delayed.

[7 : 18] It is delayed. Jesus' kingdom is delayed. And this is where we start getting into problems, isn't it? We see, don't we, the first lot of virgins in verse 3, take no extra oil with them.

So, they're thinking about this delightful party, about the bridegroom appearing, and they're confident, they're thinking, well, it won't be long until the evening, until the party starts.

We don't need extra supplies. We've only got to wait a couple of hours, till the bridegroom appears. Then we'll be enjoying ourselves. They're confident of that.

But there's a problem in verse 5, isn't there? Because the bridegroom was delayed. They all became drowsy and slept.

In their minds, the wedding feast was supposed to start at 7.30. And by 9 o'clock, the bridegroom still hasn't arrived. And they doze off into the night.

[8 : 19] And when it comes to the early hours of the morning, when it comes to midnight, the cry sort of wakes them up out of their sleep. Here is the bridegroom. The problem is the delay of the bridegroom, isn't it?

That is the key. It wasn't the fact that he came that was the problem. They were all expecting him to come, weren't they? It was the delay in him coming that caught them off guard.

The first set of virgins weren't expecting a delay. They hadn't prepared for that. So they've run out of oil. They're not ready. The warning in this passage is not only do we need to recognise that Jesus will return and get ready for that by trusting in him now.

We need to be prepared for the delay of his return. Notice in this passage all of the virgins, all of these girls fall asleep, don't they?

The foolish ones and the wise ones do that. That's not the sin here. So the problem isn't that life has to stop as we wait for the return of Jesus.

[9 : 33] But waiting has to be patient and enduring because Jesus' kingdom is delayed. Now the disciples had to get their heads around that as well, didn't they?

Matthew, who wrote this gospel, had to understand that. Just a few decades after Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended to sit at his father's right hand.

He promised the disciples that he would return to bring in his kingdom fully. And Matthew must be wondering, mustn't he, as he writes this gospel, well, where is he?

Where is Jesus? But Matthew recognises, as he writes this, that there is a delay. There is delight in God's kingdom, in Jesus' kingdom, but we have to prepare for the delay.

Dig yourself in and prepare for the delay. Jesus, again, he says, doesn't he, just wait. Just you wait for my kingdom.

[10:46] Now isn't it true that the longer the delay for something, the more likely the surprise. The longer the delay, the more likely the surprise. I don't know if you've ever moved house and you've not told the dentist your new address.

I've tried that a couple of times. It hasn't worked. You haven't heard from the dentist in ages. The six-month slot goes by, you still haven't heard.

And maybe in the back of your mind, you start to forget about the dentist, don't you? I haven't heard anything. They're delayed. Maybe after a year goes by, you might slacken off a bit and start eating a few more sweets and biscuits.

But then, 18 months later, the dentist somehow tracks you down and you get the note through the letterbox and it says, Mr Roberts, it's time for your check-up.

They were delayed so long that you weren't expecting them to ever get in touch with you. The longer the delay, the more likely the surprise.

[11:58] And because these virgins are delayed, the bridegroom is more than fashionably late, isn't he? He's extremely late to this wedding.

He is severely delayed. The delay is unexpectedly long. And that's why half of these bridesmaids are caught off guard. Because they have perhaps stopped believing he was ever going to come. The longer the delay, the greater the surprise. And if it was difficult for the disciples, then how much more of a temptation is that for us 2,000 years on?

2,000 years or so after Jesus has ascended to his father. He said he would return. He promised that. But people nowadays think, well, where is he?

Where is he? The delay has been unexpectedly long. And we've slackened off. We've stopped believing Jesus will ever come.

[13:03] But the longer the delay, the greater the surprise. Jesus says, just you wait. Just you wait. There is delight in his kingdom, but there is a delay for his kingdom.

But the third thing, on a serious note, is that Jesus' kingdom brings division. The delight, the delay, and the division.

Jesus, quite early on in this parable, he alludes to what is going to happen at the end, doesn't he? Gives us a clue. If you look at verse 2, he says that five of these bridesmaids were foolish and five were wise.

There are signs, aren't there, of a division amongst these bridesmaids. When the bridegroom returns after this unexpected delay, that division that is kind of implicit at the beginning is suddenly made public.

Verses 7 and 8, there's this panic, isn't there? Half of the bridegroom, bridesmaids, realise they don't have enough oil. They trim their lamps, but they're running on fumes.

[14:17] It's moments before they go out, isn't it? And they say, give us some of your oil. The foolish half say.

It's one of those more haste, less speed moments. They have to find more oil from somewhere. They've had all this time to get ready. You know, I do this all the time.

Had all this time to get ready. But the longer the delay, the more likely the surprise. And it crops up on you. And you're late. They speak to the bouncers.

They beg the bridegroom. They give him a sob story about the lamps. But there is a division at this point. And half of them are too late. They're locked out.

Jesus' return, Jesus' kingdom, will not be an all-inclusive thing in one sense. There will be all types of people, won't there, in God's kingdom.

[15:18] That is a glorious thing. But it is not a universal thing. Jesus will not let all and sundry into his party.

And if you think about that, what kind of host does that? I remember being at a party a few years ago with some work colleagues. And as the night went on, some gatecrashers from the street wandered in, posing as guests.

They were pretty menacing looking. I don't really know why they were there. And the host came out and found these people and took one look at them and said, I don't know you.

They caused a bit of trouble. A bit of trouble. But thankfully, one of the host's friends looked even more menacing and he threw them out.

There was a division at that party. It is not a free-for-all in Jesus' kingdom. And these virgins, they're banging on the door, aren't they?

[16:23] Wanting to get into the wedding. But Jesus, the bridegroom, takes one look at them and in verse 12 says, I don't know you. I don't know you.

They're gatecrashers, aren't they? With no real relationship to the host. And the host, the bridegroom, Jesus says, I don't know you.

They call him Lord, don't they? Did you notice that? Lord, Lord, they call out to him. Perhaps they claim some kind of affinity with Jesus.

They maybe even call themselves Christians of some kind. But when it comes down to it, they haven't invested a life in waiting for the return of Jesus.

They haven't been thinking long-term, have they? Perhaps they thought Jesus' kingdom would come easily to them and quickly. They haven't been prepared for the delay.

[17:25] And once the bridegroom comes, nobody else can sort them out, can they? The other bridesmaids can't give them oil. They can't ride into the party on the back of the others.

Other people's faith and other people's readiness won't get them in to the kingdom. Their family's faith or their pastor's faith or anybody else can't get them in.

An old theologian, Luther, said that there are two things that a man must do alone. He must do his believing and he must do his dying.

Believing is something that in a sense we have to do alone, isn't it? It is our own responsibility.

Others can help us and we can help each other, can't we?

We can encourage one another. We can spur each other on to trust in Christ. And it's actually one of the ways that we prepare for the delay, isn't it?

[18:30] That we're in a church. That we wait patiently together. And that is a good thing. But our faith in Jesus the King, it must be our own faith.

Our own responsibility. We must make our response to Jesus our own response to him. And the foolish virgins, they haven't thought it through for themselves, have they?

Jesus' kingdom will be delightful. But it will be delayed and there will be a division. We pray, don't we, that all of us in this room right now will be ready.

Having delight in the return of Jesus. Looking forward to that. It's going to be a great day. That we will be prepared for a delay in that.

Being patient and waiting. But Jesus warns us that there will be a division. And I wonder if some of us need to hear that warning.

[19:40] We need to make our own response to Jesus. And we need to hurry up and do that. We need to hurry up and wait, don't we?

This parable makes us wonder, what do I really imagine my perfect day to be? And am I dreaming big enough as I imagine that?

Does my perfect day include the bridegroom? Does it include Jesus? Jesus describes his kingdom as a truly delightful thing.

As a wedding feast. And it says to us, doesn't it, whatever we are going through today, we have that to look forward to. We have a delightful tomorrow with him.

But his kingdom in the fullest sense is being delayed. And Jesus says to us, just wait. Just you wait. The longer the delay, the greater the surprise.

[20:48] And wouldn't it be a terrible, terrible thing to be caught napping and to be late? Let's pray together.