

Week 29
April 5, 2009

Keep the Fires Burning **The Parable of the Ten Virgins**

Matthew 25:1-13

This is Palm Sunday. We celebrate the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. As we regale the Savior riding on a donkey, we commemorate his bold declaration: "I am *Messiah*, the Anointed King. I am the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9." For one day, the crowd has clarity about who Jesus is. He is the king and the prophecy fulfilled!

Later, Jesus teaches in the temple. He tells another story that begins with the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven will be like"

In this case, the kingdom is like ten virgins. Why virgins? Some would say that the king's son is looking for a bride. He's coming soon and if the virgins want any chance of being chosen, they'd better be ready.

Others would say that they all want to come to the big event. Either way five are foolish and didn't keep their lamps prepared. Five are wise. They're ready, lamps filled and wicks trimmed.

The bridegroom is delayed. Since we know that the bridegroom is Jesus, is it safe to say that Jesus is delayed in coming because he wants everyone to have a chance?

All ten virgins get drowsy. Anyone can be lulled to sleep by delays and waiting. But when the cry comes that the bridegroom is arriving, some are ready. Others are not.

When the ill-prepared ones utter a desperate plea for entrance to the banquet, the bridegroom's words are familiar and chilling. "I don't know you."

"Therefore," says Jesus, "keep watch. You don't know the day or the hour."

So what does it mean to keep watch or to be ready? Some people watch the signs of the times and study the numerology of scripture to try to predict his coming. Others are less interested in predictions and more concerned about making sure their lifestyles are flush with the hopes of the coming king.

Today, I offer my definitions and priorities that amount to readiness.

1. My relationship with God is in good standing. This means that I'm following Jesus as my life mentor and learning as Jesus' apprentice. I'm not only learning *about* Jesus, but also learning to *know him*. "I want to know him," writes Paul. And so do I, because he apparently wants this and because I grow and change the closer I am to Jesus. I don't want a cool or even lukewarm relationship. I want something hot and involved and intentional.

2. My relationships with others are in good standing. I love people around me consistently and generously. I forgive everyone for whatever hurts or slights that have been visited upon me. I stimulate others to know Jesus and grow as people. I try to build others up so that they can also be healthy and ready for Jesus.

3. I focus on kingdom values. I fix my eyes and hopes on eternal life and lasting issues of real importance. I love what God loves and stand against things that he frowns on. Readiness means that I earnestly care about the kingdom of God and not my own little kingdom where I serve my own self-concerned aims.

4. I apply my days to kingdom priorities. Readiness means that I practice love, hospitality, forgiveness, mercy, grace, wisdom and generosity. While I need to rest and make a living and take care of my family, even the frontiers of work, play and home become fields in which kingdom priorities prove their merit and increasingly shape and characterize my life. I'm learning to let go of things that thwart God's best and to take hold of whatever furthers his good plans for my life. I want to "seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness," and then watch how the rest of life falls in place. **Life works when I make God a priority.**

5. While I love God's creation and I'm thrilled by the beauty and sophistication of life, I don't want to be too attached. **I love the world and everyone in it, but I'm not too much in love with the world.** My ultimate citizenship is in heaven and this life is a temporary blessing and testing ground. Too much attachment to material things creates spiritual dullness. I want more and better than the riches of this world, though I want to enjoy God's many gifts with a wide-open heart of appreciation.

6. Readiness involves anticipation. Jesus is coming again. He promised that return as surely as he commanded us to love one another. So I long for his return, even while I hope he delays long enough for people I love to reach out in faith. I'm eager for my deliverance and the deliverance of those who suffer far more than me. I hunger for a life in which God is more directly accessible. I dream of the day when all evil will be banished. The more I love Jesus, the more I anticipate his glory and status in heaven, especially after all that he suffered on earth.

I can't say that I'm always so ready. I have terrible lapses. But since his return is going to be a surprise – like a thief in the night – living in a steady manner of readiness seems the prudent way to be. Even more, I've found that it's the best, most pleasurable and most peaceful way to live. As a pastor and as a friend, I urge us all to embrace this way of life. Together, let's grow into it.