

Sermon for Sunday, July 24, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"JESUS AND THE SECONDHAND SAINT"

St. Matthew 25:1-13

Text: "Afterward the other maidens came also saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.'"

I want to begin this morning by placing the parable of our Scripture context. It is very, very late in the ministry of Jesus. His earthly life is fast drawing to a close and soon he will be nailed to the cross. He was aware of this. And when you don't have long to live, there is a sense of urgency about whatever part of life is left. You only do or say the most important things. It is significant, therefore, that the parable of the 10 maidens comes late in the life of Jesus-- almost at the end. It means it is particularly important. It means this parable is of great urgency, of great significance.

And what is the theme of this parable? It is the theme of judgment. It tells us that human history, which is the creation of God, will one day fulfill its purposes and when it does it shall cease to exist. The dimensions of time and space and place as we know them will no longer be. Now, let me make a comment about that. Everybody has a philosophy of history. You have one. You may not have put it into so many words and you may not have thought of it as a philosophy of history, but still you have one. A philosophy of history asks these questions: Where did you come from? Why are you here? What is life all about? Where is life going? The Communists have a philosophy of history. They believe life is going somewhere. Through a certain process, called the dialectic of history, history is moving towards perfection they call the classless society. Americans generally have a philosophy of history that believes the world and human life is moving towards perfection. Every day in every way we are getting better and better. Man is the master of his own destiny. Back in the days when there were great gaps in his knowledge, man used God to explain things he didn't know about such as weather or disease or disasterous events and he called them acts of God. But now that man is so smart, he no longer needs the God of the Gaps for man is the master of his own fate. Yes, all of us believe something about life--where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. What do you believe about these things?

Let me share with you what the Bible teaches us. It says first that God created all things including man. The Bible says that God does not act haphazardly nor without purpose. Instead, he always acts with meaning, with direction, with reason, with purpose. Therefore, when God created all things - and that includes history - he had a purpose in mind. The Bible goes on to say that when God's purpose for the world gets itself worked out, when he no longer has need for creation and for history, they will cease to be. Now, that is what the Bible means when it speaks of the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. There are some who believe that the world will come to an end before God is ready! When you read some of our modern literature like Fail Safe or On The Beach, or Level Seven, you are reading about the end of things. But creation and history belong to God. It will end as soon as he is ready, but not a second before.

Now, that is what our parable is all about. Jesus in his last few days gives his disciples an urgent message in parable form. He is trying to warn them as clearly, as graphically as he can that the end of things will come suddenly and unexpectedly. God's purposes will get themselves worked out and men will be caught unawares. That's the first thing he taught in this parable - that the end will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Now, I don't know what you believe about history.

Maybe you believe it will keep on indefinitely. Maybe you believe as many modern literary figures do that man will finish history off. Maybe you believe that history will keep on until the sun burns up its energy and the earth becomes a mass of ice, a dead and frozen planet, floating through a dark and lifeless space. But I know what I believe. I believe what the Bible tells me about history. That it belongs to God and when the purposes for which he created it are completed it will cease to exist. You can bet your life and your destiny on any theory you want, but I'll take the one in the Bible because I've got lots of good and sound reasons for believing the Bible is trustworthy. And if I have to trust something or someone--which I do and you do to--I'd rather trust the Bible than I had reason or logic or other man-devised schemes because they have, they do, and they will mislead men.

The second thing Jesus says to his disciples in this parable is that since the end of the world is in the nature of things--that since this is the way things are going to happen, men ought to live their lives in the light of this. Men ought to be prepared. I want to ask you this morning what you are prepared for? If you walked out of this sanctuary this morning and were struck by a car or by lightning or by a heart attack, are you ready for that? If this afternoon at 2:38 exactly Jesus came again, are you prepared for that? You know, it is a strange thing about life. We don't really believe it will end. I think there must be some psychological dynamics at work here so that we ignore or blank out or push down into the subconscious the fact that we only live to die. For example, can you image yourself dead? Can you picture in your mind a coffin in which there is a body lying--a body stiff and cold in death--your body? Can you really imagine being dead--not being here--not being a part of what is going on? Not being able to feel or think or see or smell or taste or talk--not able to laugh or cry--not able to love or be loved. Can you image that? Yet, it is true for each of us. Within the next week I may bury one of you--or someone may bury me. Within the next year I will in all probability conduct the funeral of at least several of you listening to my voice this morning. Will it be you? The question Jesus is asking in this parable is this: are you ready for that? If Jesus comes for you personally or if history comes to an end for all of us, are you ready for that? And if you are not ready now, when will you be ready? When do you plan to start getting ready? What will all the other things you are doing now--the things you spend your time on, the things you give yourself to, the things you plan for and work for--what will they be worth to you then?

I want to make some general comments about our scripture this morning. The Bible tells us there were ten maidens and five of them were wise and five of them were foolish. The first observation I want to make is that in the daytime when you don't need lamps, it is hard to tell the difference between the wise and the unwise, between the prepared and the unprepared. Look at the people sitting about you. Can you tell who is ready to meet God and who isn't? Neither can I. If you had seen those ten girls in the parable walking down the street that afternoon going to the wedding you could not have told who was ready and who was not. It was only when it was time to refuel the lamps that it became apparent. It was only when the crisis arose, when the wedding party arrived, that it became obvious who was wise and who unwise. So, it would be risky business this morning for us to try to guess who of us is ready and who is not. But if you are not ready this morning you know yourself. In your heart you know whether you are prepared.

Let me make some comments about preparedness that grow out of our scripture for this morning. The first comment is this: there are no secondhand saints, that is, spiritual preparedness is non-transferrable. When the five unwise and unprepared girls found they were without oil, they asked of the five who had oil. Jesus said they would not give it to them. Now, I don't think he meant to teach us that these five girls with plenty of oil were stingy and mean and unwilling to share.

I think he meant to teach us that preparedness is non-transferrable. Your father may have been a paragon of virtue, your mother a saintly soul. That won't save you. I know many men who carry their religion in their wives' names. But you can't ride piggy-back into heaven. You can have an Elder for a father and a minister for a son, but that won't save you. Spiritual preparedness is non-transferrable. When the time comes for you it won't matter what you know or who you know. The only thing that will matter is what you are. Preparedness is intensely personal and terribly individual. There simply are no secondhand saints. There is no salvation by association. When your moment comes Jesus isn't going to ask you what church you belonged to or who your family was. He will only want to know if your lamp is burning. So, the first comment I want to make is that spiritual preparedness is non-transferrable.

The second comment I want to make is that preparedness is for the best and not the worst. Most of us are prepared for the worst this morning. We have collision and liability insurance on our cars, fire and theft insurance on our houses, hospitalization and life insurance on our lives. We are prepared for the worst that life could do to us. But are you prepared for the best that life can do to you? Let me ask you this question and let me ask it in the context of eternity. What is the best possible thing that could happen to you? Would it be to be rich, to be important, to be famous, to have everything you wanted? Would it be to have good health or long life or a happy marriage? I suppose all of those things are of a certain importance. But in the context of eternity, what is the best possible thing that could happen to you? Do you know what it would be for me? It would be for me to meet Jesus face to face and have him say to me, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord." I want to be prepared for the best and not the worst. I want to be prepared for joy. I don't want to prepare to escape hell. That would be a fearful sort of way to live. That was the problem of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. He said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life." He said, "What lack I yet." When you live to escape hell you are always fearful, always wondering what you lack yet, what thing you must do to escape it. But Jesus wants us to prepare for the best, to prepare for heaven, to prepare for joy.

The third thing I want to say about preparedness is that there finally comes the time when it is too late to prepare. The girls went to sleep as they waited for the wedding party. There had been a time when they were prepared, but time passed on and their oil burned low. At last the great moment came. The wedding party arrived! Five of them were no longer prepared and there was no time left to get ready. It was simply too late. They went off to the market to buy, but it was midnight. The shops were closed. There is no indication in the parable that when they returned they had oil. If their lights had been burning they would have been recognized. But in the dark they beat on the door and cried to be let in. But the bridegroom couldn't see who they were in the dark and he said, "I do not know you." No, you can't buy when the shops are closed.

There may have been a time in your life when you were really ready, really prepared. But are you ready now, this morning? How low is your oil this morning? If Jesus comes for you personally, or for all of us, are you ready right now? You see, you can't buy when the shops are closed and there are no secondhand saints. There is a time for buying; there is a time for stocking oil; there is a time for preparing. But there also comes a time when an unexpected midnight comes and the time has arrived and the shops are closed and there are no secondhand saints.

These days in which we live are the "Now" days. We are the now-generation. We want freedom now; we want fashions now; we want the good life now. Yes, we are the now generation. Well and good! How about Jesus now! And if not now, when?