

Saints Triumphant

November 13, 2005

Matthew 25:1-13

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Got Oil?

1. It's foolish to take no oil
2. It's wise to bring extra oil

^{NIV} Matthew 25:1 "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶ "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' ⁷ "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' ⁹ "'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰ "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. ¹¹ "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' ¹² "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' ¹³ "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Dear Saints Triumphant,

The "Got Milk?" campaign has been highly successful at putting its milk-mustachioed celebrity images before the eyes of Americans. Maybe you've seen a picture of the tennis-playing sisters Venus and Serena Williams sporting milk mustaches. Or maybe it was the picture of actress Angelina Jolie or racecar driver Jeff Gordon or quarterback Peyton Manning. They and dozens of other celebrities have been photographed with milk mustaches to promote the health benefits of milk and—of course—to increase the sales of milk. Why is it important that we've Got Milk? It's important because milk is a good source of calcium and protein and Vitamins A and D, for starters. For healthy

bodies and strong bones it's important that we drink milk. Thus the question, "Got milk?"

Our Gospel lesson this morning asks a similar question. It's not "Got milk?" but "Got oil?" The oil in question here is olive oil, which, among its many uses, served as lamp fuel in Bible times. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, having oil made all the difference. The virgins who had oil for their lamps were ready to meet the bridegroom when he came. Those who hadn't thought to bring oil were ill-prepared, missed the wedding banquet, and were left outside in the dark.

We're waiting for the Bridegroom to come, too. This Bridegroom is Jesus Christ and he's coming from heaven on a day and at an hour that only God knows. To ask whether we have oil is to ask whether we're prepared for his coming. That's an important question. It means the difference between experiencing the eternal joys of the wedding feast of the Lamb in heaven and being left outside in the dark. So what about you? **Got Oil?**

1. It's foolish to take no oil

Jesus says here, *"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom."* The subject here is Judgment Day. Jesus had been speaking extensively about this in Matthew 24. He told about the signs that would serve as a prelude to his return. He told how his angels will gather the elect from the four winds on that day. And he stressed that Judgment Day will dawn unexpectedly. **"The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him,"** Jesus said (24:44) Then Jesus told this parable to illustrate his point.

There are ten virgins in this parable. For "virgins" we would say "girls" or "bridesmaids." These girls are looking forward to enjoying one of the important social events of that day, a wedding. It seems that these girls are waiting for the bridegroom to bring his bride from the home of her parents to the home of his parents, where they will celebrate the wedding with a banquet. This procession from the home of the bride to the home of the groom usually took place at night. So, if you want to join the procession, you had to have a lamp or a torch.

Now about these girls, Jesus in his parable says, *"Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them."* All ten girls wanted to take part in the procession to the home of the bridegroom and join in the wedding feast, but five of them didn't prepare properly. They didn't bring any

extra oil. Maybe they didn't think they'd have to wait so long. Maybe they counted on being able to borrow some oil or buy some if they ran out. At any rate, their poor preparation will have consequences. The wait for the bridegroom is long. When he finally comes, their lamps are going out. They need oil. They can't borrow any. And while they're away trying to buy oil, the bridegroom arrives. The virgins who were ready went with him to the wedding banquet and the door was shut. The foolish girls, the ones who weren't prepared, were refused access to the banquet.

How good are you at being prepared? Is it a way of life with you? Do you have an earthquake preparedness kit in a closet somewhere at home? How about the batteries in your smoke detectors? Are they still good? Do you have a fully stocked first aid kit? And are you ready to whip up something delicious if unexpected guests stop in for dinner? Do you have a will? I have an idea that it's a minority of us who can say "Yes" to all these questions. In some ways, most of us would have to admit, we're not well prepared. Why not? Maybe because we reason that the chances are slim that we'll experience an earthquake or a fire or a medical emergency or die suddenly. Or maybe we just don't want to think about such things. But, of course, earthquakes, fires and medical emergencies do happen. And when they do, many people find themselves wishing they were better prepared. And people do sometimes die suddenly. They may not even have a chance to wish that they were better prepared.

It's going to be much the same on the day that Jesus returns. Many people won't be prepared for his coming. In the previous chapter, Jesus said, **"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."** (Matt. 24:37-39) Just as the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius caught the citizens of Pompeii and Herculaneum almost in their tracks, so the return of Jesus will happen suddenly, with no time for unprepared to get prepared.

It's worth noting that Jesus speaks this parable to the church. I think that's plain from the fact that the ten girls all have lamps and they all want to join in the procession. In other words, outwardly, at least, they're waiting for the bridegroom. If you asked any of these five foolish girls, "Do you want to go to the wedding banquet?" they'd

surely have said "Yes." But the fact is, they weren't prepared. They hadn't counted on the long wait. They hadn't planned ahead. In answer to the critical question, "Got oil?" their answer, sadly, was "No."

Is it possible to identify yourself as a Christian, to have your name on the membership rolls of a Christian church, to pray routinely, "Thy kingdom come," and to confess that Jesus will come from heaven to judge the living and the dead, and still not be prepared when Jesus does finally come? Yes, it is. It's possible for those who claim Christ's name to live unrepentantly, rather than confessing and renouncing their sins. It's possible for those who are nominally Christian to blindly assume that they'll have more time to put their spiritual houses in order. Like those foolish folks who attempt to run a railroad crossing when the lights are flashing and the crossing arms are down, it's possible to think that you've still got time all the way up to the time when time has run out. That's why, as we come to the close of another church year, our Savior warns us not to live foolishly. "*Keep watch,*" he says, "*because you do not know the day or the hour.*"

There's something strange about the story Jesus tells. Have you ever been late to a wedding reception? Did you get there when all the other guests were seated? If that's happened to you, did you find the door locked? Probably not. Did you plead with those inside for admission to the banquet, only to have them refuse to let you in because you'd arrived late? I doubt it. People show up late for weddings and wedding receptions all the time. But that's where this parable is different, probably because the point of the parable is that those who aren't ready when the Bridegroom comes won't gain admission to heaven. Finally, this isn't a story about wedding banquets, it's a parable about the kingdom of heaven. So instead of talking any more about the perils of being late, let's explore what it means to be ready when Jesus comes. How can we be among those wise ones who take oil in jars along with their lamps?

2. It's wise to bring extra oil

At the end of this parable, Jesus says, "*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*" What Jesus is really calling for here is that we live in a state of perpetual readiness for his return, that we are prepared for any eventuality.

I know people who are like this. I have a pastor friend who carries one of those Leatherman tools on his belt, because—I guess—you never know when you'll need a pliers, screwdriver, punch, scissors,

knife, bottle opener or corkscrew. We tease him about it. But occasionally we ask him to break out his Leatherman because it comes in handy. When I was at the seminary, I had a friend who, like me, was engaged to a girl who was teaching in Michigan. So we planned that we'd drive to Michigan for the weekend to visit our fiancées. Actually, he was going to drive—and, oh yes: it was winter time. Before we left, he opened the trunk of his car to show me how well prepared he was. I was amazed. He had a blanket, a snow shovel, flares, jumper cables, a flashlight, extra windshield washer fluid and more things that I can't remember. He was prepared for just about anything. And, inside, I was thinking, "Dave, were not going to the North Pole. We're just going to Michigan." But I'm the same guy who, on another trip to Michigan, put Carol's car in the ditch and, were it not for the kindness of strangers, would probably be sitting there still. It's good to be prepared.

So who is it who is truly ready for Jesus to return? The answer, of course, is a Christian. That is, one confesses with his mouth "Jesus is Lord" and believes in his heart that God raised him from the dead. People who are ready for Jesus' return take seriously "the signs of the times" that Jesus spoke about in the chapter before this: wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, false Christs, the increase of wickedness and the love of many people growing cold. Christians see these signs as an indication that the Savior's coming is getting closer, as a call to repent of their sins and trust Jesus as their only Savior. They confess their sins and return to their baptisms for the assurance that God regards them as not guilty. The wise people of whom this parable speaks know that the Bible is the key to being spiritually prepared. The law exposes our hypocrisy and shines a spotlight on beliefs and practices that are at odds with being truly prepared for Jesus to come. Then comes the gospel with its comforting promises, reassuring us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. As Paul points out in his letter to the Philippians, it's impossible to be prepared for Christ's return if you're living as an enemy of the cross of Christ. That is, if your stomach is your god, if your glory is in your shame, and if your mind is on earthly things, then your destiny is destruction. Paul instead portrays preparedness this way: **"But our citizenship is in heaven,"** he writes, **"And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."** And then he follows it up by writing, **"Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long**

for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” (Php. 3:20-4:1)

I would guess that the “Got Milk?” ad campaign has been highly successful. It’s made it cool to drink milk and it has also reminded us of the health benefits of drinking milk. Would that the “Got Oil” campaign might be even more effective as it reminds us that none of us knows the day or hour of Jesus’ return, but that as we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus, we do have the oil that makes us well-prepared for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom. Amen.