

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon Title: "Three Chances for Redemption" (A Journey through Matthew)

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Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I am going to attempt something that I have never attempted before. I am going to preach a message on three parables of Jesus at the same time. With a wave of my wand, with a few magical words, I hope to pull off this stunt. Here we go...

We find ourselves in the first parable at the beginning of Matthew 25. Some Bibles call it The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven shall be like ten virgins who are holding ten separate oil lamps and hanging around for a wedding to begin. They are waiting for the groom to show up in order to move on with the ceremony, unlike weddings today in which we wait for the bride to show up. There is nothing different about these ten virgins – they probably are dressed the same, hold the same kinds of oil lamps, and come from the same village – except that five of them are holding vessels with extra oil. The other five virgins do not own such vessels. The oil they have in their lamps is

all they have. All ten stand around waiting for the groom to show up, and since he is taking such a long time, they fall asleep.

Now, can we agree from the start that there is nothing inherently evil about these girls? People would call them sweet girls, if they introduced them to us. They all fall asleep, which on the one hand we can say that their delicate bodies got tired like anybody's else would and they fell asleep, or on the other hand we can say their falling asleep is like falling into sin. We all fall into sin. There isn't anything inherently evil about us – it's just from time to time we become drowsy to any good that is happening around us. We find ourselves sinning, and the darkness surrounds us, and we don't like it. We as limited, sinful humans who get lethargic with sin, and we try to find a way out.

The way out comes through a call. The ten virgins hear somebody shouting that the groom finally has arrived. They wake up and go back to holding their lit lamps. But there is a problem. Five of the virgins don't have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. The other five have plenty of oil but not enough to give away. The five foolish virgins ask for extra oil, but the five wise virgins cannot provide any. "You need to go to the store and buy extra oil," the foolish virgins are

told, which they do. The groom arrives, the five wise virgins follow him to the wedding ceremony, and the doors are locked behind them.

Now the five foolish virgins have enough oil. They are a little late – we might call them fashionably late – and they have enough oil to welcome the groom. But the doors are locked. Nobody will let them in. The five virgins are stuck outside, and they seem to plead with the groom to let them in (“Lord, Lord, let us in.”) He says, “I have no idea who you are.”

We have already established that there is nothing inherently evil about these ten virgins. There are not bad people, as we would describe them. They all fall into sin like anyone of us could. But when the groom does arrive, and virgins awaken from their sin, five of them are ready to welcome the groom. They anticipate that something will go wrong because, as sinful human beings, something will always go wrong. Sin will always throw us for a loop, so we should be ready. Five of the virgins are not.

When we fall into sin and then we wake up from it eventually, we have to have something to fall back on. The five wise virgins had their extra oil to fall back on in order to welcome the groom. What do we have to fall back on? Our faith in Christ, definitely. Our faith is something we should be expanding and deepening

while sin is not distracting us yet. Our worship of God is a good thing to fall back on, and again we need to grow in our adoration and thanksgiving to God. Our community of friends may help us to repent from our sin and support us as we make amends, and teach us again how to love and live. Sin is ever-present and will do what it can to trip us up. We are not inherently evil people, but we are not immune to sin. At some point we must wake up from it and then, God willing, we have something to fall back on, so we may see God once more and welcome him to our hearts.

Parable Two finds us in Matthew 25:14-30. It is a story about a man who is going to take a long trip somewhere out there. He puts three servants in charge of his possessions. We know what these servants receive: one gets 5 talents, the second 2 talents, and the third 1 talent. The traveling man doesn't pick these people because one is more important than the other. This has nothing to do with popularity contests. The servant who received one talent might be the most popular of the three, for all we know. Popularity or fame has no bearing here. The traveling man also doesn't pick the servants according to their sinfulness. The servant with one talent is not more evil than the one with 5 talents.

Like the ten virgins before, there is nothing inherently evil, nothing obviously wicked about them. Sin affects them as regularly as sin affects us.

The traveling man takes off, and the servant with 5 talents immediately goes to invest the money, so that it doubles. Something needs to be said about these talents, which to the normal Jewish person would be a very rare coin indeed. It would be like holding a \$100,000 bill.<sup>1</sup> One talent equals 6000 denarii, which equals 6000 days of wage.<sup>2</sup> Anybody working one day would receive one denarius, so if we worked 6000 days straight we would earn one talent. 6000 days straight is over 16 years without one vacation, without one day off. The traveling man gives these three servants great responsibilities. He chooses them because he trusts them with his life. He knows their great value in keeping things nice and orderly, so he can travel to whatever country and be sure that all his things will be taken care of.

The one servant invests his 5 talents and earns 5 more. He has earned 30,000 more denarii for his master. The servant with 2 talents earns 2 more, 12,000 denarii. The master is now up 42,000 days of wage, or over 115 years of straight wage. The last servant takes his talent and buries it. He could have

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<sup>1</sup> Do you know whose face is on that bill? President Woodrow Wilson.

<sup>2</sup> *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*, cf. 1623.

earned the master an additional 16 years of wage, at least.

These servants are not inherently evil. The one with 5 talents could have earned 5 more, and than stolen one for himself. Being in the presence of so much money could have caused him to falter and sin against his master. The one with 2 talents could have buckled, as well. The servant with one talent doesn't buckle to greed, but he does buckle to selfishness. He buries the talent, and with that talent he also buries his head in the dirt. He fears his own security in handling something so important. He doesn't take that gift from the master for a spin, and pays the price for being so egocentric.

The man wanted to save his dignity, his worth, his reputation. And Jesus says that if you want to save your life, you will lose it. You want to bury your talents, you will lose that talent and so much more. “[However,] those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”<sup>3</sup> Those who are not ashamed of their talents, the ability to take on whatever God gives them and share them with all joy and thanksgiving, those people will gain so much more. Those who are not ashamed of their faith in Christ, and what people might think about them, they

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:35.

will gain so much more.<sup>4</sup> The word *servant* inherently means that a person serves. One goes out and does what God commands. The servant with the one talent loses the title of servant. It's gone. He is nothing, now. We don't even know what he is after the traveling man returns. The servant is not a bad guy – he does a really bad thing that costs him dearly.

Parable Number Three. The sheep and the goats. The passage from Matthew we read today. I bet you are thinking that I am going to say that the goats on the left side are not inherently evil. There is nothing obviously wicked about them. Well, I can't say that, because a good number of those goats could be inherently evil. They could be cheats and thieves, people who have always been bad and will always be bad. They just don't care about anybody. They don't care what we think or what we might do to them, because they are quick to tell us what they think about us. They are quick to hurt us in some way. So they obviously would never feed or cloth or visit anybody.

However, we cannot say all the goats are wicked. Some of them might have just fallen to the left side out of pure ignorance. They might have been so oblivious

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mark 8:38.

to the needs of others, because they are too busy taking care of themselves. Working 40 hours a week plus spending an additional 10 hours in the car commuting zaps all our energy. Driving sons and daughters from one sporting event to another gives us little time to do anything else. When we are able to do nothing, we try to create as much “Me time” as possibly without any distractions. What may happen is that we live for the “Me time,” and the needs of others are unimportant. The hungry and thirst, the naked and jailed, the average person around us remains disappointed. Anyone may fall into the trap of not noticing others. Anyone could turn into a goat.

Sin is sneaky. Sin lurks under the radar, undetected, until it is too late. Hardly ever do we notice what sin is doing to us. Hardly can we refuse to become entrapped in it. We are not inherently evil, obviously wicked people, but we are not immune to sin’s persuasions.

Jesus tells three parables to warn his listeners that sin may have a hold on them, and it could be really bad. They might be at a point of not return. In each parable, Jesus ends with saying, basically, that it is too late. The five virgins are left outside. The servant who used to have one talent is cast out to the



darkness. The goats to the left receive everlasting punishment. At some point sin can get a hold of a person, and make him or her so unprepared, so selfish, so callous that there is nothing left of the person. Nothing can be redeemed.

But we haven't reached that point yet, have we? We don't see that point of no return, do we? We are not unredeemable. We are not lost to sin forever. Jesus tells three parables as a warning to what could happen. What *could* happen. The future can be rewritten. Our destiny's path can take a detour and find another glorious road. These three parables might shock the listener, but if they know Jesus Christ and what he is all about, the listener will then become proactive. Christ gives three chances for redemption, so the proactive listener takes them.

He or she takes an inventory of his or her own life. Where have I been unprepared, allowing sin to run roughshod over my life? How do I deepen my faith, my worship, my devotional time, my prayer life, and my relationships. How is Christ showing me how to deepen all these important areas of my life?

How have I been selfish with my talents? Is it out of fear? Is it laziness? What talents has God given me, and what adventure is the Holy Spirit opening for me to use those talents?

How have I been ignorant of the needs of others? All of us fall into this category. How have deadlines trumped human interaction? How has “Me time” made me dull to “Their time?”

We want to be like the five virgins, right? Then follow their lead. We want to be the servant with 5 or 2 talents, right? We want to be counted as a sheep on the right, right? Follow their lead. We know what Christ wants us to do. We may ask at any time, and he will let us know.

Sin is a sneaky little devil, but Christ is greater. The life of sin will always give way to life in Christ, and the life in Christ will always make the present and future brighter for us and everyone else.