

“Stupid Christianity”
Matthew 25:1-13
November 3, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

In today’s passage, Jesus is continuing to make application to the truth of his second coming. He is urging us to be ready for his return and the judgment that will accompany it. As Jesus said in the previous passage, we are all like those in the days of Noah who were facing the flood of God’s judgment. God provided a means of deliverance in the form of the ark, and only those securely inside the ark were ready for that judgment. Once again, God promises a coming judgment and asks us to examine ourselves to see if we are ready. Have we availed ourselves of the remedy God provides for us to withstand the day of judgment?

He makes the same point in today’s passage by means of a parable about a wedding. Weddings in Jesus’ day were lengthy affairs that would begin by the groom and some of his close friends, the groomsmen, going to the bride’s house. There he would present gifts to her family in recognition of what they were losing with her move to his household. There would be ceremonies that would take place there all day long. At night, the groom would take his bride to his house, where there would be more celebration, often lasting for several days. It was customary for this nighttime journey from the bride’s house to the groom’s to be something of a parade, with those accompanying the bride and groom carrying lit torches in celebration. It is this torchlight parade that is central to Jesus’ parable. The ten bridesmaids, referred to here as virgins, are waiting for the groom to conclude his business at the bride’s house and begin the joyful journey back to his house. For some reason he is delayed, and they all fall asleep. They are awakened by the joyful announcement that the bride and groom are coming, and this is the point at which a problem appears with five of the bridesmaids. They have run out of oil and can no longer light their torches for the parade. They ask the other five to let them have some of their oil, but it is quickly apparent that this would be a bad solution. There would be an insufficient amount of oil, and the torches would all go out. This would be dishonoring and insulting to the groom, not unlike if in our day all the bridesmaids decided to skip the wedding and go to the beach instead. So five bridesmaids join the march to the groom’s house, while the other five go in search of a merchant to sell them more oil. By the time they get their oil, the bride and groom have made it to the celebration at the groom’s house. They knock and ask to be let in, but are denied entry.

Sometimes biblical words become so familiar that they lose their punch. One of the prominent words in our text is an example of this, the word “foolish,” used to describe the foolish virgins who don’t prepare adequately for

the possible tardiness of the groom's arrival. The word feels a little too weak to describe their behavior, especially in light of the severe consequences resulting from their lack. The stronger, though more vernacular word, "stupid," does a better job of capturing the idea of this parable. These virgins, or bridesmaids, are an example of stupid Christianity in that they represent a group of people claiming to follow Christ but who are completely unprepared for his coming. I note three features of this kind of stupid Christianity in this parable.

I. A Fleeting Christianity

There is a form of Christianity that is good for this life but not for the Day of Judgment. It is like these foolish virgins. For much of this parable, there is no discernible difference between the ten virgins. They are all bridesmaids staying together to do their part in this wedding. You wouldn't be able to look at them and say, "Those five are obviously foolish while the other five are wise." The difference isn't revealed until the tardy arrival of the bridegroom when it becomes clear that the five foolish virgins have made inadequate preparation for his delayed arrival.

Stupid Christianity is the kind that works for this life only but is completely inadequate for the Day of Judgment. The five foolish bridesmaids had all responded to an invitation to be part of this wedding party. They had all made a "profession of faith," so to speak, happily declaring themselves to be a member of this wedding party. Presumably, they were all glad to be in this wedding, feeling some affection for the groom. But the kind of Christianity that doesn't go any further than making a statement of one's faith and having positive feelings toward Jesus is foolish. It is semi-Christianity, and it will be revealed as completely inadequate on the most important day in the history of the world, Judgment Day.

This form of Christianity is like a bad insurance policy. All insurance policies are the same when it comes to paying your premiums. They all expect timely and full payments. What distinguishes a good policy from a bad one is what happens when it comes time to make a claim. When the insured event happens and it is time for the company to pay up, it is too late to do anything about it if the insurance company is a bad one that fails to pay the claim.

Part of my family history involves the sad discovery of a bad insurance company. During the Great Depression, my grandparents on my father's side experienced the tragedy of their house burning down. They suspect the neighbor deliberately set it on fire out of anger toward them. My father was a young boy at the time, and this neighbor's dog had attacked him on numerous occasions. On one of these occasions his injuries were more serious than previously, and my grandfather had reached his limit. So he took his gun and shot the neighbor's dog, thus leading to retaliation from the neighbor in

the form of setting their house on fire. Though my grandfather had dutifully paid his insurance premiums to protect against such an event, when it came time to pay the claim, the insurance company lacked the funds to pay.

So Jesus is telling us here that there is a form of Christianity that does fine for this life but not for the Day of Judgment. It is the difference between stupid Christianity and authentic Christianity. Which version do you have? I notice from Jesus' parable that this is a terrifyingly individual matter. The five foolish bridesmaids tried to get oil from the five wise, but were refused. The faith of your parents, your children, your spouse and your friends may bring benefit to you in this life. But on the Day of Judgment, their faith will be of no benefit to you. Their ample supply of oil will not make up for your inadequate supply. So do you have enough oil? Let's turn now to consider what this oil is.

II. A Flamed-Out Christianity

The oil is authentic Christianity. To run out of oil on Judgment Day means that one's faith is revealed as inauthentic. So what is authentic Christianity? Paul wrote the entire book of Romans to answer that question, and its answer also appears throughout the New Testament. In short, it is faith that has the fruit of obedience. How is that we keep burning brightly for the Lord? It is by remembering the gospel.

One of the chief features of stupid Christianity is that the gospel is viewed merely as the ticket to get a person into heaven, while having little if any effect on a person before that time. It is like someone who plans on taking a trip by air. Six months before the trip, the airline ticket is purchased and then put away. For the next six months, there is little thought given to the ticket, because this traveler knows that the ticket has already been purchased and will be ready for use when the departure date arrives.

The gospel should never be viewed merely as one's ticket to heaven. Rather, it should fuel our lives every day. We receive the gospel through repentance and faith. Authentic Christianity is marked, then, by a daily experience of repentance and faith. Last Sunday, we celebrated Reformation Sunday, commemorating Martin Luther's posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle church. The first of those theses expresses this well. "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'repent,' he intended for the whole life of believers to be a life of repentance." It is through repentance and faith that the oil is constantly resupplied to us.

Have you run out of oil? One of the symptoms of doing so is that the Christian life becomes one simply of going through the motions. There is no fire left. There is no active walk with the Lord. Obedience gets reduced to the minimum needed to keep looking good or feeling good. And when significant

trials are encountered, any trust in God that may have existed changes to anger at God.

So what should you do if you think your oil has run out and you are running on empty in your Christian life? You do the same thing any unbeliever needs to do when first coming to Christ. Admit your sin and inability and throw yourself upon the mercy of Jesus. Jesus never turns away a humble sinner who comes to him for help. No matter the severity of the sin, no matter the lateness of the hour in which a person comes to Jesus for help, he gladly comes and fills up what we lack. Just tell the truth. If your Christianity is empty on the inside, start by being honest about that. And then go to Jesus with it. Ask him to help you. He will never turn away a humble sinner.

The Old Testament prophet Zechariah had a vision about this. It was a vision of a golden lampstand with seven lamps, such as the one in the temple. The lampstand in the temple, located in the Holy Place, symbolized God as the light of the world. It was to be kept burning 24 hours a day, every day. So a significant supply of oil would be needed for this. In Zechariah's vision, there was a large bowl above the lampstand for the oil. But where does the oil for the bowl come from? Zechariah saw beside the bowl and lampstand two olive trees, one on each side. There would be an unending supply of oil through the two trees. Then, in a well-known verse, the angel interprets the vision for Zechariah. **"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts"** (Zechariah 4:6). Zerubbabel was the governor of Israel who led in the rebuilding of the temple after the exile of Israel. God is saying that he will supply the oil that's needed, and he will do so not by Zerubbabel's might or power, but by his Spirit. We get oil in the same way—through renouncing self-trust and looking to God.

III. A Failed Christianity

When the bridesmaids finally arrive at the wedding feast, presumably after getting their oil and after it was too late to use it as needed, they find themselves locked out of the feast. **"And the door was shut"** (v. 10). They obviously think that some mistake has been made, so they begin knocking and calling out, **"Lord, lord, open to us."** We then encounter the second surprise of our parable. The first one was the coming of the bridegroom in the night, awakening the bridesmaids from their sleep. Since no one knows the precise time of his coming, the coming of Jesus will be surprising. It could be before we go to bed tonight or it could be another two hundred years or more from now. The second surprise of our parable is the response given to the bridesmaids when they ask to be let in to the feast after the door has been locked. The Lord says to them, **"Truly, I say to you, I do not know you"** (v. 12). That was an idiom used by rabbis who dismissed certain students. It means, "I don't want

anything more to do with you.” At the most critical point, this kind of Christianity fails.

Why the harsh response? At first glance, it seems to be out of proportion to something as simple as failing to have a sufficient supply of oil. But their failure was more than something like forgetting to pack your toothbrush for an overnight trip. It reveals a disrespectful attitude toward the bridegroom. When you have an important meeting, you are careful to make thorough and complete preparations for the meeting. A wedding is a type of meeting, and people prepare for months for this important occasion. If you are going to a job interview for a job you desperately want and need, you are going to do everything possible to prepare adequately. The failure to do so reveals an apathetic attitude.

Jesus, full of grace and mercy, is attempting to warn any who have an overly casual attitude toward him. There are people who say they want to be Christians, but who are quick to add that they don't want to take Christianity too seriously. They want to be a Christian, just not too much of a Christian. For such people, unless they repent, the last words they will hear from Jesus are these: “I do not know you.” Those words will be remembered for an eternity, and it will be too late to do anything about it. But it is not too late now. The thief on the cross teaches us that in his life it is never too late to repent. The Lord is full of mercy, and he will always receive the repentant sinner. But this parable teaches that a time is coming, and we will never know when that time is, when it will be too late. At that time, his judgment will be as great as his mercy is great during this age before his return.

CONCLUSION:

Though the main point of the parable is the five foolish virgins, I would like us to close by remembering the five wise virgins. They are with the bridegroom in the wedding feast. There is a well-known children's song based on this parable that goes like this. “Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning. Give me oil in my lamp I pray... Keep me burning to the break of day. And I will sing forever, sing forever, sing forever to the King of kings.” That is authentic Christianity, one marked by sincere faith that leads to the fruit of obedience. I can't imagine two more different outcomes than what is experienced by these ten virgins. Five sing forever with the Lord in eternal joy while five are removed from his joyful presence for all eternity.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 25:1-13

1. Jesus' clear meaning in this parable is that there are two kinds of Christianity: an authentic kind and a foolish (stupid) kind. Jesus' return, and the judgment that will come on that day, will reveal the difference. What are some characteristics of false Christianity that come to your mind?
2. Every group that does polling on America's religious practices has concluded that Christianity is on the decline in our nation. But others who have looked into the polling results more carefully have noted that the decline seems to be limited to denominations and churches with declining levels of orthodoxy and commitment, while churches with more active and vibrant faith are not shrinking at all. How would you describe more active and vibrant churches and Christians? What qualities and features might they exhibit?
3. Zechariah 4:1-7 is a good passage to describe how we maintain a good supply of oil in our Christian lives. Read the passage and discuss the application of its most famous verse in this context. "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel; Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (v. 6). How does that verse apply to you? What area of your life do you need to trust the power of God's Spirit instead of your own power or might?
4. False Christianity quickly runs out of steam (oil), and this is especially evident in the fact of significant trials. What kind of faith is needed to be able to weather significant trials in life? Can you think of a significant trial in your life that you have had to weather? What helped you to do so?
5. What was so bad about the five virgins neglecting to bring enough oil? How would you respond to someone who says, "It seems like the response of the bridegroom (the Lord) is overly harsh in comparison to the level of offense here." [*Answer: it is disrespectful to the groom to be so unprepared. Their lack of preparation shows an overly casual attitude and self-centered view of the Lord. If you have an important meeting, you make sure you prepare adequately. Yet we think that when it comes to the Lord, anything we might want to do is okay.*]
6. The last phrase of verse 10 is frightening: "the door was shut." What is the response of your heart when you think about a day in which the possibility of salvation will be forever gone? Are there people you would like to pray for who need to repent while there is still opportunity?