

Title: Ready For His Return

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Shane Gould

Sun. August 29, 2010

Introduction (Slide 1)

Good morning everyone. My name is Shane Gould, and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. Our text for this morning is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25:1-13, where Jesus tells a story about a wedding. Today, when there's a wedding, the bride is almost never on time – she's the last to arrive. But in this story, Jesus says it is the groom who arrives late, not appearing until the middle of the night at an hour no one expects. Jesus is telling a story that is really about himself. It's a parable, which means it's a story with a spiritual point to it. And the point of this story is that Jesus is going to return, but his return will be much later and more sudden than anyone expects. More importantly, Jesus wants us to be prepared for when he comes.

Before we read the passage, there are a couple of things about the story that are helpful to understand. First, the story mentions virgins, which culturally is another way of saying young, unmarried women, who are serving as bridesmaids in the wedding party. Second, the lamps the bridesmaids are caring are really hand-held torches to be used for a candle-lit procession. And third, when it comes to parables, the details of the story are not nearly as important as its main point. Now having said that, let's dive into the story...

Matthew 25:1-13 (Slides 2-4)

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

"'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.'

"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.

"Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'

"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

(Slide 5)

For many Christians, Jesus' return, or second coming, is not new information. It's in the back of our minds that he will one day return. But the point of Jesus' story is that his return is something that needs to move from the back to the forefront of our minds, something we daily anticipate and live for. In telling this story, Jesus wanted his disciples to know that he would one day return, it would take much longer than anyone thought, and it would be surprising when it finally happened. But the single, most important point about this parable is how important it is to be ready for his arrival, that when he appears it will be as if you already know him.

Pray.

(Slide 6)

Last week we concluded our series on Genesis, where everything with God began. Today, we fast forward to the way the Bible says everything will end. Throughout the Bible, God's relationship with his people is described in the terms you would use to describe a marriage, where God is the groom and we are his Bride. God wants the kind of relationship with you and I that you would expect to find between a husband and a wife who are deeply in love. In giving himself up for us in the death of his Son, God asks us, in return, to live exclusively for him. When meeting with couples who are looking to be married, I always point them to Ephesians chapter 5 where the Apostle Paul compares a husband's love to the way Jesus' loves his people.

(Slide 7)

In **Ephesians 5:25**, Paul says,

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."

The love and commitment of marriage is a picture of the way God relates to us in the person of Jesus. Weddings are some of the most beautiful occasions we gather for. How many of you attended a wedding this summer? Aside from the speeches, aren't they wonderful? There's a lot of planning that goes into a wedding celebration isn't there. It doesn't seem

to matter how small or big the wedding, there are always hundreds of details that go into planning the perfect day. Weddings are lavish, fanciful parties filled with meaning and joy. In thinking about my wedding, I remember how anxious I was to see the double doors of the sanctuary open and Linda begin walking down the aisle and all of our family and friends with us. She was gorgeous and still is.

A wedding celebration is the analogy God uses to help us understand what it will be like when Jesus returns to be fully united with us. In the Book of Revelation, it says that when God's final act of gathering his people to himself happens, it will be a party like no other, like a grand wedding reception:

(Slide 8)

Revelation 19:7-9

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb [Jesus] has come, and his bride [his people] has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'"

It's no wonder that Jesus uses the story of a wedding to talk about how important it is to be ready for his return. Those who have made Jesus the love of their life and are living ready for his return are in for an amazing party. Do you believe that this morning? Have you got your sights set on that day when Jesus will be standing before you, inviting you into the wedding supper of the Lamb because you were prepared for his coming?

(Slide 9)

I have sometimes lost sight of the hope of Jesus' return. When I've been on a great holiday, having a really good day in Whistler or the Okanagan, I have thought to myself, 'How could things ever be more beautiful or more enjoyable than this?' But the truth is that at Jesus' return, there is something way more incredible coming. Those are the good days. Then there are the more average days we all have, where, if we're honest, we really need to grab a hold of the hope Jesus' return offers.

By his Spirit, we can experience the presence of God 'now' in all kinds of ways. But following Jesus also is about looking ahead. It's living in the hope of his return when he will finally do away with or heal everything that has gone wrong with us and our world. By his Spirit we can begin to get to know Jesus now, within our hearts and as he ministers to us through those he also lives within. But when Jesus returns, we will know him face

to face. It's one thing to have a pen pal, to talk with someone over the phone, or to read about them on Facebook, but it's a totally different experience to meet someone face to face.

(Slide 10)

In his book Surprised By Hope, Tom Wright says, "When God renews the whole cosmos, the New Testament insists, Jesus himself will be personally present as the center and focus of the new world that will result."

The Apostle Peter said that Jesus' return is something that not everyone is going to believe:

2 Peter 3:3-12 (Slide 11)

"First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." . . . But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. . . . You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

Jesus' return isn't a hot topic for most Canadian Christians. Theologically, there are few things that are as important. It's a huge topic that we could never do justice to in the few moments we have this morning. But let me say a few basic things about understanding Jesus' second coming.

First, the promise of Jesus' return is so huge, that people sometimes respond to it in one of two extremes:

(Slides 12-14)

The first extreme I like to call the "**Sci-Fi**" **Second Coming**:

Apart from the day or hour, there's an obsession with predicting exactly when Jesus will return, as though his return will happen on an episode of LOST, where he swoops down and rescues everyone from the hatch. There's a fixation on escaping the world and wondering how meeting Jesus in the air will affect those left behind. Because we are so close to the day, there's nothing else worth talking about. That's the one extreme.

In my early years growing up, I remember the church my parents and I attended being playing Christian movies about the end times. It was frightening! One was called "A Thief In The Night." It was basically a Christian horror film. Some of you from the late

seventies remember that one. The movie was an attempt to try to imagine with great fear how the end was going to come.

In the mid eighties a book came out called “88 Reasons Why Jesus Is Coming Back In 1988.” To get ready, people sold their possessions and moved to the country. Jesus’ warning of his return wasn’t for us to get crazy but for us to get our hearts and relationships ready for the hope of his return.

(Slides 15-16)

The other extreme I like to call the “**No Show” Second Coming:**

Jesus’ return is just a general metaphor for the hope of the world returning to goodness. Jesus is not real enough to appear in any personal or physical way. Spirituality is good but anything too supernatural intellectually uncomfortable, so let’s not get carried away.

But Jesus, and the apostles after him, all talked about the day when he would visibly return and take his rightful place within the earth – it wasn’t a metaphor. The promise is very real.

So how should we respond to this important truth? How should we understand the reality of Jesus’ second coming? Simply, that it will happen and that we need to be prepared for it. There are lot of aspects to Jesus’ teachings that we do not fully understand, and Jesus’ second coming is one of them.

But there are some things that the Bible makes abundantly clear:

When Jesus Returns (Slides 17-20)

1. Jesus will return the same way he left.

The angel at Jesus’ ascension told the disciples that he would return the same way they saw him go into heaven. Acts 1.

2. Jesus’ coming will mark a radical transition.

The present world will be judged and then healed – not necessarily destroyed and replaced. Like the way Apartheid has been judged and is now in process of being healed. Revelation 20.

3. Heaven and earth will be joined together.

No longer will earth and heaven be separate realities as they are now. In Revelation we read about a new heaven and a new earth being created, where a heavenly Jerusalem becomes the centre of both in chapter 21.

Let’s return now to the parable of the ten bridesmaids, where Jesus says five were foolish and five were wise.

(Slide 21)

In village life, a wedding celebration was a high point in the community, so people paid a lot of attention to who was on the guest list and who wasn’t. And we see that at the end of the story, Jesus says that there will be those are invited in and there will be those who will be left outside a closed door.

Ancient Jewish wedding customs varied from village to village, but one thing common to every Jewish wedding was an evening procession of the groom to the bride’s family home. In this story, Jesus says the procession is delayed well into the night because the groom doesn’t show up until midnight. Jesus says that all ten bridesmaids fell asleep. They all grew tired because it was a long wait and likely longer than any of them expected. They had to be woken up by a loud announcement.

After suddenly waking up, only some of the bridesmaids found themselves ready for the groom’s arrival. A typical torch would last about 15min before it would have to be re-fuelled by soaking it in oil. The five wise bridesmaids had brought extra oil with them. They were prepared for the long wait, even if it was longer than they had probably expected. But for others, panic begins to set in, as they ask the others for oil. But each of the bridesmaids with oil only have enough for themselves. A lamp, or torch, without oil would be like a flashlight without batteries. It would have been like asking someone to give you the batteries from their flashlight so you could put them in yours.

The basic point Jesus is making is that when he appears, there will not be any time to change your life – it will be too late. Someone else’s walk with God cannot suddenly become yours. Each of us is responsible for our own hearts and our own walk with God. At the end of life or at the return of Jesus, it will be too late to get ready to confidently meet him. We need to have oil now. We need Jesus’ presence and work in our lives now, so that when the time comes we will be ready.

Even after the foolish bridesmaids make it back to the door of the wedding banquet, the groom turns them away, saying, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ To know Jesus is to have relationship with him. The groom’s claim to not know the young women at the door is not that he doesn’t know who they are but to say that he doesn’t have relationship with them. There’s a real difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing him as the centre and love of your life. God knows each of us, so well that the scriptures say God knows how many hairs are on our head! But only a few choose to give him their hearts and lives.

Jesus' point is that we need to be ready to meet him at any moment. Knowing that Jesus is going to come again should change the way you live and look at life.

(Slide 22)

Nicky Gumble from the Alpha Course gives the illustration of three demons having a strategy session about how to keep people from God. The first demon in the conversation said, 'It's easy. We can just whisper in people's ears that there's no God.' One of the other demons said, 'That's no good. They will just look around at their surroundings and see creation and know that there's a God.' Then another demon said, 'We'll tell them that there's no such thing as sin.' The other demon said, 'That's not going to work. All they have to do is read the newspaper to see that isn't true.' And then the third demon said, 'I know, we'll tell them there's no hurry, to leaving coming to God another day, and pretty soon they'll just forget about it.' 'Ahh,' said the others, 'That's it!'

(Slide 23)

Jesus invites us to come to him now, to begin preparing today. So, how can we be ready?

A very simple answer is that we are ready to meet Jesus when our relationship with God and others is what it should be. We will have lots of oil in our jar when we can meet Jesus at any moment, in any situation, and not be ashamed. We are ready when we are working to resolve outstanding issues with others, as far as it is within our control.

Living in light of Jesus return will change your life, your priorities, what you spend your time on, how long you let things go between you and God, between you and someone else. Knowing that Jesus will return to judge the world and fully unite us with himself will change what you think you are here for, what your goals in life will be, what you are concerned about and what you will decide not to worry about.

Now, living with Jesus' return at the forefront of your mind isn't about living in fear or in a place of anxiety with God. It's actually the opposite. When you live anticipating Jesus' return, you live in the hope of his return. The apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3:4 that, "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

In one sense, we will never be fully ready to meet Jesus because, this side of heaven, we will always have short-comings and a degree of sin in our lives. But on the other hand, Jesus has sent the person of the Holy Spirit to

begin a work of transformation within us, getting us ready for Jesus' arrival.

I have heard it said that in being ready for his return we need to "Live as though Jesus is coming back today and plan as though he is not coming back for a hundred years."

What changes do you need to make in your life this morning, so that you will be ready when Jesus returns? Don't put off the question, ask the Holy Spirit to show you. Decide that you're going to live in the hope of his return.

Pray.