

The Ten Virgins

DAVE BAST

You know the motto of the United States Coast Guard? It is *semper paratus*, which means always prepared. The various duties of the coast guard include anti-terrorist activities, suppression of the drug trade, coastal patrol, search and rescue—that is a big one—but whatever the task, a high degree of readiness is demanded. Each time they report for duty, coast guard personnel never know what might be expected of them, or whether they might be called into harm's way before their watch has ended. So, *semper paratus* makes a great motto for them, and it is a pretty good motto for Christians, too: Always prepared. That is the lesson of one of Jesus' final parables, and we will look at that story today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and today, Scott, we come to program six in a seven-part series on the parables of Jesus; and we have kind of broken this series...at least the first six of them...into three pairs of parables, depending on the theme. So, we had kingdom stories about what the kingdom of God is like and how it grows. We had parables of grace, of God's lavish love poured out, like the father of the prodigal son and the elder brother; and then parables of judgment. In the last program we looked at the first of those parables of judgment, and then today we get another one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we are going to go to Matthew again, Matthew 25, and if you know Matthew 25, there are actually three parables of judgment in Matthew 25. We mentioned in the last program that the closer Jesus got to the end of his life, the more serious things got, and the more urgent was his call to be ready and to make the ultimate decision for the kingdom of God because that is the ultimate reality that is going to last. So, there are three different parables in Matthew 25. It ends with the sheep and the goats, which scholars debate whether that is really a parable or just an image, but that is where we are. Next up for Jesus is arrest and crucifixion; and so, he is getting very urgent; and the parable we are going to look at today, the parable of the ten bridesmaids or the wise and foolish virgins, as it is sometimes called, that parable, like all the parables of judgment Jesus told are premised on two things that are not terribly popular today among non-Christians, and sometimes not even in the Church.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and two truths that the Bible assumes from beginning to end, really, but that especially come to the fore in Jesus' parables of judgment; and the first of those truths is the idea that the world is going to have an end—that it has a termination date—that it has an expire...best-used-by date, you know, like we stamp on our food. God has determined human history, not only the course of history, but he has set a point at which history will come to an end; just like our lives have a terminal point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. I mean, we may think to ourselves: Well, I won't be around when the end of the world comes, or when Jesus comes again; but each of our own deaths is ultimately our own term limit...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is our own terminus—that is our own limit. So the world, the universe has a limit. It is not going to go on the way it is forever, nor should we think that we as human beings are just going to keep improving it, like on *Star Trek* or something, where we are just going to clear up all of our sins and all of our social ills and build a better order on our own. No, the Bible says that is never going to happen. The order that is coming is the kingdom, and only God can bring it; and he will. The curtain will ring down on history at some point. So, that is the first premise of all the parables of judgment, including the one we are looking at today.

DAVE BAST

And you mentioned there are two, Scott. The second one is the idea that at the judgment, either at the end of our lives or at the end of human history and the final judgment, we are going to be...well, not to put too fine a point on it...judged.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Judged.

DAVE BAST

We are going to be held accountable. God is going to demand from each of us sort of a statement of what we did with the life that he gave us. You know, the sheep and the goats makes that point so clearly, when Jesus says some are going to be on the right hand and some are going to be on the left. So in the Bible, judgment actually means to separate or distinguish fundamentally; and we are all going to be, you know, kind of brought under the microscope of God's searching gaze.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one thing that we should point out, too, is that for Christians...right...for those who know the grace of God...that is why we looked at parables of grace before we looked at parables of judgment...for Christians we don't need to fear that. During the Middle Ages and medieval times the Church would often use the prospect of judgment to terrify people into...you know, scare them straight...you know, get them serious. They would put carvings over the front doors of churches...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Depicting horrible scenes of a lake of fire and the judgment. When the Reformation came along...Martin Luther, John Calvin...they preached grace, and that we don't have to be terrified of it as believers; which is why in the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the premier Reformed confessions, there is actually a question that says: How does the coming judgment of God *comfort* you? So, we don't need to be terrified of it, but we cannot deny its reality either. There will be an ultimate sorting out.

DAVE BAST

You know, as so often is the case, maybe the pendulum has swung too far the other way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And we are not serious enough about the fact that there is this day coming—this great day; and it is coming for each of us, sooner perhaps rather than later, when we will need to answer for our lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and to get our attention, Jesus once told a parable that goes like this. In 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. ²Five of them were foolish, five were wise. ³The foolish ones took their lamps, but they did not take any oil with them; ⁴the wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵The bridegroom was a long time in coming. They all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶At midnight, the cry rang out, ‘Here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him!’ ⁷Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out.’”

DAVE BAST

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.’ ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹Later, the others also came, ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘Open the door for us!’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ ¹³Therefore, keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is the picture, and in a few minutes we will unpack this a little bit more fully, but one of the things that strikes you just in reading it, Dave, just as we just did, is that finality of it: The door gets shut at some point. There is almost part of you that sort of says: Aw, come on. Open the door, you know, when they come back...they had to go buy some more oil...

DAVE BAST

Give them a break...give them a break.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Jesus is not giving any wiggle room. Again, he is really trying to get our attention here about the seriousness of this; the *semper paratus* that you talked about, the Coast Guard motto, the always being prepared. This is serious.

DAVE BAST

The description of these ten virgins or maidens...let’s call them young girls because that is really what all the words are pointing to...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

These are young girls; and again, we will unpack some of the details a little bit later in terms of the wedding customs of that day; but the key difference between them is some are wise and some are foolish; and in scriptural terms...in biblical terms...those are very, very significant. They are pregnant words. One of the ideas of wisdom is foresight or preparedness or looking ahead and anticipating; and the idea of folly or foolishness is you just live for the moment. You never worry about tomorrow. You never think ahead. You have no foresight; and that is illustrated perfectly in these two groups, one of whom is ready for any contingency, whether the bridegroom comes sooner or later, and the other group is not. We will dig into those details a little bit more in just a moment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and the sixth program of a seven-part series on a few of the parables of Jesus. Today we are in Matthew 25, the parable of the ten bridesmaids—the ten young women—the ten virgins—wise and foolish; and we just read, Dave, the parable, but we need to unpack a little bit of the imagery because it is easy for us to think weddings then were kind of like weddings today, but they weren't. There is a reason why Jesus used the imagery he did.

DAVE BAST

Although the commonality with our time is that most weddings were bound by tradition.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You did certain things. Today it is highly unlikely in a fancy church wedding, you know, with all stops pulled out that the groom would show up wearing a tee shirt and a baseball cap or the bride would be in cut-offs, you know, and flip flops. There are certain traditional practices that hold true; and in Jesus' day, the key thing was the procession of the wedding party from the house of the bride to the house of the groom. So, the bride and all of her attendants would be in her father's home and all prepared, and the groom would show up with his friends and he would pick up the bride and they would together march to his house; but sometimes this thing was delayed because there would have to be some negotiations maybe that took place last minute of what is the dowry...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Who is going to pay what; and so, the premise of this story is the groom and the bride are late in getting to his house for the actual feast or celebration.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, there is a delay; an unusually long delay. I mean, you know, within certain...I mean, if you have ever been to weddings sometimes they are supposed to start at 6:00 and it is ten after and they are still seating the parents and things get delayed; but this one has a really long delay, which...and of course, you know, we can see already what Jesus is saying. He is preparing the Church for the possibility of a very, very long delay; and we will talk more about that in a minute; but it is long enough that everybody falls asleep, not just the wise or foolish ones, everybody in the wedding party with the bride and the bridesmaids, they all conk out because it gets really, really super late. These days we would imagine bridesmaids carrying bouquets of flowers. Then they carried oil lamps. That was part of the symbolism of their day. Everybody had an oil lamp, and it was expected that you would be able to burn your lamp brightly as part of the sparkly part of the ceremony once it started.

DAVE BAST

Well, and not only that... So, we have the wedding party...and remember, all this is happening at night and there are no street lights...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And there is very little illumination; just very dim lights. So, there is the wedding party, but then waiting at the house of the bridegroom, Jesus says in the story, there are ten maidens or ten virgins, it is sometimes translated. The word he uses means young girls. As one New Testament scholar, A. M. Hunter has pointed out in his book on the parables, these girls would have been probably village girls who are going to be welcome, because the whole village comes to the party...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure, right.

DAVE BAST

But they are not necessarily bridesmaids who would accompany the bride. They are waiting at the door...they are waiting outside the groom's house...and they are all holding their lamps so that they can find their way in when the time comes, in the darkness, but they are just waiting; and while they are waiting, they all fall asleep, as you pointed out. I think that is one of the key details in the parable. It is not the...the five wise ones are not wise because they are staying wide awake...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

They are propping their eyes open with toothpicks so that they can see him coming. Everybody falls asleep. They are all taken by surprise, in other words, when the cry goes out: Here comes the bridegroom; and they all wake up with a start and discover that they are low on oil because their lamps have been sputtering now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And half of them, the wise ones, had brought some extra oil with them. Again, it is not that they had bigger lamps with a bigger oil well in the first place, they were all the same, but they had brought extra oil with them. Another interesting part of the parable, Dave, which points to the ultimacy of this that we talked about earlier in this program, when the foolish ones who didn't bring extra asked the very simple request: Hey, could we share? Let's go halvesies on this. Oh, no; no, no; then we might not have enough. So again, there is a lot of slamming of doors in this parable...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No! That is not how it is going to go. I have sometimes thought though, Dave...I wonder...Jesus does not say this, but there is a sense in which you think that Jesus, in telling this parable to the people who were very familiar with wedding customs in their own day, of course, that the delay is presented as unusual. Most weddings the bridegroom was not *this* late; and so I have sometimes thought, did the wise ones *look* wise for lugging an extra can of oil with them? I kind of thought... When I preached on this once I said imagine going to a wedding where half of the bridesmaids carrying their bouquets also bring in a big watering jug to keep their flowers fresh. It is like, how long do you think this ceremony is going to go? You brought a watering can with you? That is ridiculous. It might not have *looked* wise to bring the extra oil, but it was, because you never know.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the other thing is, this is a good illustration of why you cannot press details too strongly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

In these stories of Jesus'; because I hear this story again, I read this story again and I think, whoa, they tell them to go out and buy more oil? It is midnight! Where are they going to find...who is going to be selling oil at midnight? But again, Jesus paints this picture to help set up the idea that some of them were ready, even though the delay was extraordinarily long, and others were not ready, and there came a moment when it was too late to get ready. That is really what he is trying to say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And really, to understand this we need to back up to the end of Matthew 24, which comes right before this parable. All of this is what is sometimes called the Olivet discourses of Jesus; a long series of speeches Jesus gave right before his crucifixion; and so, he is talking about the end times and the second coming in Matthew 24—the previous chapter; and here is what Jesus says at the end of that chapter, which sets up this parable: ³⁶“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father... ⁴²Therefore, keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come; ⁴³but understand this, if the owner of the house had known at what time of night a thief was coming, he would have kept watch. He would not have let his house get broken into. ⁴⁴So also you must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is the real key to this story, and the whole idea is of Christ's return, and then the final judgment. Those two events are interlocked. The judgment will happen when he comes back...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It seems like a long time, you know; there was probably... I think there is evidence in the New Testament of a fairly widespread expectation among the first Christians that he was going to come back within their lifetime; but if they had listened carefully to these parables about judgment they would have seen this note of delay and would not necessarily have jumped to that false conclusion. Well, now it has been two thousand years and people are kind of scoffing...they already started scoffing: Where is this return you keep talking about? That ain't gonna happen. And Jesus says: You know what? It is going to come when you least expect it. You are all going to be asleep. When that moment comes, then it is too late to get right with me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But then you have that thing that we want to talk about before we close this program, Dave, where Jesus does say you must watch; but according to the imagery in the parable, watching does not mean not falling asleep—they all fall asleep. So what does it mean to watch if it doesn't mean just always being on your tippy-toes scanning the horizon; and we will think about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are looking at Matthew 25, the parable of the ten bridesmaids; and Dave, we have been saying there is an ultimate nature to the kingdom of God when Christ comes again—when that bridegroom returns—that is it; and it is going to be too late to make other decisions or other plans or other contingencies. You are ready or you are not, and that is the ultimate thing; but again, as we just said from Matthew 24, this parable is nestled in a context where Jesus has just advised the disciples: Watch, always watch. But what does that mean?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, the imagery of the parable means it does not mean not falling asleep because all of the ten bridesmaids do. It is just that when they wake up they are ready, but this is an interesting tension to say: Watch. What does that mean? We know that in history some Christians have kind of gotten obsessed with watching for the end. It is *all* they think about; or they are *sure*, even though Jesus said: Don't look at my words to try to figure out the date. I don't know, so therefore I am not coding this into my speech. I don't know the hour. But some Christians think they do, and then they sell everything they have and they...you know, they are sure it is going to be on October 14, 1854, or something like that; and then of course it does not happen...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We know that that is not what watching means; that is not what he meant, to be forever scanning the horizon. So, what did he mean?

DAVE BAST

You cannot live at a fever pitch of excitement, and you cannot succumb to rapture-mania. That is not what Jesus is trying to get at at all, as you say, Scott; and you know, there have literally been groups... You mention October... I think it was 1842, when followers of one William Miller...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Self-anointed Bible teacher...they literally did sell their possessions. They put white robes on. They went out on a hillside in upstate New York because Miller had assured them Jesus was coming back that night, and obviously when it didn't happen they had some recalculation to do; and it has come right into our time, as recently as a couple of years ago a Bible teacher on the radio was predicting a date for the end. So, Jesus says: No; no one knows; not even I know in my earthly life here. Only the Father knows. That is his business; and you are not going to know; and furthermore, you are all going to be surprised. I think that is the point of the falling asleep of all ten of them. Everyone is going to be caught by surprise, because this is going to happen instantaneously and without warning—without prior... The air raid sirens are not going to go off to give you a few moments. There is a wonderful scene in a Peter De Vries novel, I think it is *Let Me Count the Ways*, where this scoffer and skeptic... His wife takes the kids to church and he is all, you know: I don't want anything to do with that; and one night there is a huge explosion in town, and he quick runs to the kitchen and sticks his head under the faucet to try to baptize himself because he thinks it is the end of the world; and then he finds out no, the fireworks factory just blew up in town, that is all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

These things happen.

DAVE BAST

But, so watching...watching really means living your life close to God, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; not hedging your bets that oh, I don't think it will be today so I can sin a little bit more today, or I can be spiritually lazy today; it won't be today. Watching, Dave, means simply being faithful. In fact, I love... Again, these words from Matthew 24, when Jesus is making an analogy of a servant in a house and he says:

⁴⁵“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶It will be good for that servant, whose master finds him doing so when he returns.” In other words, what Jesus is saying there is: Just keep serving supper...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Keep eating, keep doing your daily tasks, do them faithfully, do them well every single day, and although you will be startled like everybody else when the end comes, you will be ready because just every day you are just being faithful. So, watching...again, yes, it is not standing on your tiptoes, it is not quitting your job so you can keep watching the horizon for the first puff of cloud when Jesus comes; no; it means doing your job with an awareness that you belong to Christ; and just do everything accordingly and you will be ready.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is a wonderful old spiritual based on this parable: Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. I love that image because it reminds us of the other imagery Jesus used for light: You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the earth; let your light so shine before others that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father, who is in heaven. That is what it means to watch...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It means to keep your lamp burning, to keep your light shining; keep on keeping on. Martin Luther supposedly said if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow, he would go out and hoe his garden today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or I heard he said he would go out and plant an apple tree, partly because he believed the new creation would be a continuation of this one; but keep doing what you are doing.

To switch our imagery just a little bit from the one of lamps, I read somewhere that when you read the Olivet discourses, as they are called, you know, at the end of Matthew, Mark and Luke, where Jesus is making these apocalyptic sayings about the end of time, it becomes clear. Jesus is not training hundred-yard-dash sprinters. He is training marathon runners to keep moving for the long haul; and I think that is right. Jesus was not trying to create starry-eyed disciples who would spend their lives calculating the date of the end. No; Jesus is training marathon runners for the long haul of just being faithful every single day.

DAVE BAST

The lesson this parable in particular teaches is equally applicable if we apply it just to the end of our own lives...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Not only to the end of the world; and I love something I read some years ago written by J. I. Packer—the theologian J. I. Packer—about how to live in readiness for our own final day or final hour. He says: Think of each hour as God’s gift to you to make the most and best of it. Keep short accounts with God. Live in the present. Gratefully enjoy its pleasures and work through its pains with God. Open all your life to the Lord Jesus. Spend time in his company, responding to his love. Say to yourself often that every day is one day nearer, and get on with what you know to be God’s task for you here and now. I think those are wise words of counsel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think exactly. Again, as you said earlier, Dave, despite first century beliefs that it could be any moment now, he is hinting, no, it could be a lot longer; and as you said, Dave, two thousand years now. I am sure even the Apostle Paul would be surprised it has been this long; but that is what it is; and Jesus' call to us is clear and clarion: Always be ready; *semper paratus*, as you said in the beginning of the program.

DAVE BAST

Don't give up hope, because he is still coming and we need to be ready when he does.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our study of Jesus' parables by digging into the parable of the Good Samaritan. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear on *Groundwork*.

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