



If you are like me, you don't mind occasionally riding the limit of your gas tank. Some people don't get so excited about this habit. I know it's not good for your fuel pump to run the gas close to empty, but occasionally I push the limit. My wife hears that beeping sound. "What was that?" she asks. I respond, "Oh, don't worry. That's just the fuel indicator. It beeps when we are approaching E." The conversation continues: "We should probably stop at the next gas station, right?" "Not necessarily. We're fine." "What do you mean? We need to get gas!" "We could probably squeeze a few extra miles. There's a better place to stop in just 200 miles." "But it's on E!" "Actually, it's just a hair above E. We could go below E before we really run out. They always add more than it really shows you."

For some the near empty gauge means 'Excitement and time to see just how far you can really go.' For others it simply means 'Empty. Don't be foolish. Get some gas now.' You might be able to play around when it comes to travel. But what about when it comes to our eternal destination? Today we'll consider Jesus' parable recorded in Matthew 25:1-13. Jesus used a parable to warn against foolishness and to teach us the importance of being spiritually prepared.

Jesus depicted a wedding celebration. There are ten virgins who are waiting to join the procession as the bridegroom takes the bride to his home and the marriage celebration. The ancient Jewish marriage had some customs different from what we find common today. Parents had their children already betrothed at younger ages. When celebrations like the one in Jesus' parable took place, the bride and groom were already legally bound. Yet they were not living together as husband and wife. Then, on a set date, the groom would come and take his bride home to be his wife. When he brought her to his home the marriage would be consummated and officially begin.

This event included an evening homecoming procession in which the male friends of the groom would accompany him, and his bride's maiden friends would accompany her. The maidens who accompanied the bride in this procession would bear lamps as they traveled along to the groom's home. There they would have the wedding feast and celebration. This is the setting of Jesus' parable. It's the celebration of the homecoming of the bride.

In Jesus' parable the virgins are waiting to join their part in the procession and the celebration. They all have brought along their lights. But there is a problem. Some of them are foolish. They didn't bring enough oil. At midnight a cry goes out and the virgins are told, "Come out to meet the bridegroom!" That is their big moment and time to shine! They will march alongside the bride and groom, and they will join in the festivities! It's like in a modern wedding ceremony when the music starts playing and the wedding party is supposed to march down the aisle. Except the foolish ones weren't ready. They scampered in the dark trying to get their lights ready. They didn't want to miss out.

What does the lamp oil represent? Jesus doesn't give a clear point by point representation for this parable. But it is clear that the lack of oil was a lack of preparedness. They didn't have enough of what was essential to enter the wedding feast. The oil can't be understood as our good works. No one would ever have enough to enter God's wedding feast. But the lack of oil could point us to something we don't want to run dry: our faith. Our faith can run dry if we do not feed on the bread of life and drink the water of life. We are only prepared through faith in our Redeemer. Once again, oil cannot represent good works. But the oil is what keeps our faith burning when Christ returns. It is the gospel which the wise have in good measure, and the foolish don't keep in good supply.

The foolish virgins are found today in believers who are acting out the part of a Christian. They are convinced they belong as part of the wedding feast in heaven. Yet they are not prepared for Christ's coming. These foolish ones are not necessarily unbelievers who speak against Christ. They don't openly deny Christ. No, they are those who mingle with the church, consider themselves a part of the Christian crowds, and yet sadly they will end up outside of the procession on the last day. They lose faith. Consider all the believers in Christ you once knew who believed. But they later lapsed from faith. They might stick around and attend Christmas services and join some special holidays, but their faith is in reality gone, so that all that is left of Christianity in their lives is an observance of its external forms.

How foolish it is to find that your faith is weakening and to act as if everything is going alright. How foolish to feel that your faith is wavering and about to be snuffed out and to do nothing about it! Consider the times when we begin to act like these foolish virgins. We reason that we have enough faith to go without a church home for a while when we move. We reason our faith will stay strong if we skip services just a Sunday, or two, or three, or a few months! We think that our reserves of the bread of life will get us through when it is running out. Don't we need it every day?

Sure, we might not lose faith, the light may not go out. But why would we want to run near empty when we are able to fill up? I was on a trip to a wedding once driving hundreds of miles to get there. I was taking a route which amounted to just over 500 miles of travel. I filled up the gas tank at the start. After driving for nearly the duration of the entire day my wife and I were exhausted. Darkness had set in, and it was beginning to rain. Delay after delay, it became a long trip, and we were ready to stop. We were so close to our arrival. Then that light came on. It indicated that we were nearly out of gas. "We are so close..." I thought. "We might just make it without stopping this time." I

should have filled up at another stop along the way. When I finally did stop, I had never pumped that much fuel into the tank at once, 29.6 gallons. My van's tank holds 31 gallons, so I had just under 5% of my fuel left. But I didn't have to travel that way. How much more should we be careful not to run through life short on the life-giving gospel?

When you neglect to make regular time for the Word of God you are in danger of running spiritually dry. When someone decides they don't need the Lord's Supper they act like those foolish virgins. When a believer thinks it is okay to drift from the anchored faith they are acting like those foolish virgins.

And the danger is far greater than being left on the side of the road in the dark in the rain. The foolish virgins in Jesus' parable panicked. "Give us some of your oil," they said to the wise virgins. The wise responded, "No way. We can't. It doesn't work that way." Those who starve themselves spiritually may have this as their backup plan. They think they can live off the faith of others around them. But it will not work. You cannot join the procession to the feast of heaven by grabbing onto the tailcoat of your brother or cousin. I've heard it said to me by individuals who are starving themselves spiritually, in danger of running dry, "I've got a brother who is very active in church. My parents are life-long members and so am I. I've got an uncle who is a pastor." But I've had to tell them, "You can't live off of their faith. There is no such thing as faith by proxy. You need to be connected to Christ and grow in faith yourself." I've also warned some others, "Don't be surprised if you wake up one day and are wondering how you lost your faith in Jesus." Some heeded the warnings. They responded with repentance and renewal of their faith.

Others foolishly ignored it and are in danger of ending up like foolish virgins: outside the kingdom, shut out because they foolishly did not desire to be prepared or desire to have the free gift of faith. The foolish maidens arrived back for the procession after frantically looking for more oil. But it was too late. When they came to seek entrance into the triumphant celebration they were shut out. The door was closed. Pleaded as they might to gain admittance they were told, "I tell you the truth: I don't know you." This is what Jesus will say to all who are unprepared for his coming because they neglected the means of grace.

It is by faith alone in Christ that we are saved. So, when someone despises God's free gift of his gospel --the Bible, baptism, and the Lord's Supper-- when they despise him by neglecting to gather for worship, by neglecting to baptize or be baptized, by neglecting to take the free gift of the gospel, they lose the gift the gospel brings.

One is reminded of the sad truth that they were given the choice to buy more without cost and fill up on the gospel without charge (Isaiah 55). A strong and lasting faith is freely given by God by his free means of grace. There is no charge for church attendance. There is no fee for a subscription to hear or read from the Bible. You don't have to pay for membership and spiritual growth opportunities in a faithful church that ministers with the Word. (Even if you could put a price on the gospel, it is priceless, and we could never afford it!) God's gospel is freely available in so many ways for so many years to those waiting for Christ's return.

Jesus concludes by saying, "Therefore, keep watch!" At the bridegroom's first coming only the enemy seemed to be capable of keeping watch. They bore torches and swords to bind him, not celebrate his coming. And his disciples grew tired and had a faith so weak and empty it led them to flee him and abandon him, even deny him.

But Jesus came the first time to pay for our foolishness. His bride, the Church, stared on and watched as her groom laid down his life to rescue her. And his bride, the Church, watched as he rose to life and showed how he had risen. The good news is he loves his bride and freely has won the gift of life for her. There is a triumphant parade and feast ahead for all who trust in him! He invites us to join the celebration as forgiven formerly foolish sinners.

Before he left, he said to his bride, the Church, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If I go there I will prepare a place for you. And when I come back, I will take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am." With these words you can almost hear the groom speaking to his bride before the homecoming procession takes place. Jesus will soon come. And all who trust in him will be brought to be with him forever. Whoever does not believe stands condemned, shut out of his kingdom forever.

"Therefore, keep watch!" Be ready. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. The sudden and unexpected coming of the bridegroom is what Jesus' coming will be like. We know he is coming. But we don't know exactly what day or hour. When he comes the call will sound like a trumpet and clashing gong. Everyone will be called out --whether dead or living. And all who trust in Jesus will be standing in the triumphant procession into glory and eternal life.

Until the Son of Man comes again in his glory, don't be foolish. Don't think you can get by and squeeze a few extra miles and try to run on empty. Don't be foolish; be filled with the gospel. Be overflowing with the Spirit and immersed in the Word of the Lord. Drink deeply of the water he freely gives with his gospel. Continually come to the Lord's invitation to partake of his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Be filled with life and light! And look forward to the day we drink at his table at the eternal wedding feast. Be wise and ready. He comes again in glory soon!