

I'm sure each of us has had experiences of being late. Some people even look at their chronic lateness as a positive thing. They're optimistic; they're fundamentally hopeful. They believe they can fit more tasks into a limited amount of time than others. Or, they think big; they don't sweat the small stuff; they concentrate on the big picture and see the future as full of infinite possibilities. Or late people just get it; they like to stop and smell the roses. Life was never meant to be planned down to the last detail. So, they can just enjoy the moment.

But the harsh reality is sometimes our lateness has consequences. If you're late for your flight and the door to the plane is shut before you arrive at the terminal; there's nothing you can do about it. Or if you miss a deadline, like for a college application or a tax return, there's not a whole lot you can do about it but suffer the consequences.

As a pastor, one of my pet peeves is when people are late for a wedding. The ceremony has started, and I see them tip-toe in and sit in the back. It's almost always disruptive to what should be a very sacred moment. In fact, I think there should be a new law against being late for weddings or at least the doors should be shut for good once the ceremony starts.

Today we're looking at a story or a parable Jesus told where it seems to me, he'd agree. The setting for the story is a first-century Palestinian wedding. In Jesus' day, a wedding celebration lasted a week and involved the entire village. It was an event everyone anticipated: mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, not to mention the bride and groom and their attendants. Friends and relatives were given time off work so they could enjoy the festivities. In Bible times, the groom's family was responsible for paying for the whole thing. Having paid for two daughters to get married, I think I was born in the wrong place and wrong time!

But in the story, something goes terribly wrong.

"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 ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time 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. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.' "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." Matthew 25:1-13

This parable reveals it's about the Lord's return

Notice here Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God in the future sense. This is forward-looking to the reality of the time when Jesus returns to fully consummate the kingdom of God. This is consistent with the context in which this parable was told. In the chapter before this, Jesus spoke of the future and a coming crisis that would be culminated by his own return. He said no one, not even He, knows the exact time of his return. Because of that, he said to be ready; to be prepared.

Just before this parable, he told a story about a wicked servant who was put in charge of his master's house while he was gone. He figured his master would be away a long time, so he sat around, boozed it up, and mistreated his fellow servants. But the master came home unexpectedly, saw what he'd been doing, and threw him out. Jesus said, "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming" (24:42). Notice this is pretty much the same thing he said at the end of this parable in verse 13, "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour." But there's a slight difference. The problem of the wicked servant was the surprisingly quick return of his master for which he wasn't ready, but in this story, the problem is one of delay. Five of these young ladies weren't ready because of the long delay of the groom.

The setting is a Middle Eastern wedding feast

This fits with what we know about Middle Eastern weddings of that day. The delay of the bridegroom wasn't unusual. The week-long celebration started when the groom came with his groomsmen to the bride's home to bring her back to their new home. This event was surrounded with great pageantry and drama. The bride would ask a number of friends to be what we