

# How to wait for the revolution —Matthew 25:1-30

**Theme:** Having told his disciples to be ready for his return, Jesus now spells what's involved in waiting for him—and it's anything but being idle

Jesus spells out the apparently contradictory nature of waiting. On the one hand, having made your preparations, it's okay to relax (to the point of going to sleep v1-13). On the other, an essential part of 'waiting' is living life to the full, responsibly using all the resources that Jesus has entrusted to us (v14-30). In particular, Matthew expects his readers to see this as a call to an active discipleship marked by trusting Jesus, sharing his good news and doing good works.

## Questions:

1. If you had to sum up the message of these two parables in a single sentence, what would it be?
2. What do you think the oil in the first parable symbolizes?
3. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that we're ready for the arrival of the groom? How can we help each other?
4. In what ways can we relax once we've ensured we're ready for the groom's arrival?
5. What has Jesus entrusted to us that he will ask us about when he returns?
6. What 'profit' are we expected to earn for the Kingdom?
7. In what ways do you think the lazy slave was like the Pharisees in Jesus day? In what ways might he be like us?
8. What do these two parables tell us about how we should be living as disciples in today's world?
9. How can we help one another to remain alert?
10. What opportunities do we have during the week to share our faith with those outside the church? How can we encourage one another to make the most of them?
11. Do we find the fact that Jesus' coming seems to be taking so long a problem or an opportunity? Why?
12. What would we like Jesus to say to us when he comes? How can we be sure he will?

## Your stories:

## Potted summary

Jesus tells two sharp parables that illustrate what it means to watch and wait for his coming.

The first has to do with whether we've made the right preparations for his arrival, while the second concerns what we do with the life he has entrusted to us.

Together they tell us clearly that waiting is not idleness, like waiting for a bus. Rather it is active, urgent working for his Kingdom as its appearing will be sudden and unexpected.

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# What the passage is about....

Having said very clearly that his return will be sudden and unexpected, Jesus now spells out what being ready and waiting for this means in two more parables. Matthew has recorded these in his manual on discipleship for two reasons.

Firstly, the revolution started in Jesus' ministry will not be complete until Jesus returns and his Kingdom finally comes on earth as perfectly as it exists now in heaven. If we are going to enjoy that time, we need to be ready.

Secondly, there were probably some people in the churches Matthew sent his gospel to (sometime between the late 60s and early 80s) who wondered why Jesus hadn't yet returned. It was taking so long; maybe he wasn't coming at all. This lengthy discourse on the future is designed to help them (and us) realise that Jesus' coming will be as sudden and unexpected as it is certain. So we need to be continually ready.

These two parables spell out what being ready means. They flesh out what the first parable of the three (in 24:45-51) briefly told us.

## **1) ready and waiting for the Kingdom (1-13)**

Jesus indicates that this parable is about the future not the present by introducing it with a reference to 'that time' (the time of his return) and by using a verb in the future tense. Normally, he introduces parables of the kingdom with a present tense verb – 'the Kingdom of God is like...' (13:24, 31; 18:23, 22:2). Here he says 'the Kingdom *will be like*' (1). So, it is about the moment of his coming, and the story asks: 'will we be ready?'

The setting is a familiar scene in village life – a wedding. The ten women are not bridesmaids in our sense of the word. Rather they are young women waiting for the procession of the groom and his friends and family arriving at his home for the wedding banquet.

Obviously celebrations at the bride's home have gone on longer than expected. It's dark when the groom arrives and the young women need to light their lamps. Five succeed because they are well-prepared; five don't because they've come without oil. It's possible that the women arrived in the dark with their lamps burning but the groom was so delayed that while the women waited, they nodded off and their lamps went out. Only the prepared ones were able to re-light their lamps and so see their way into the groom's house before the door was closed and the feasting began.

Alert readers will see immediately that Jesus is talking about himself and the arrival of his Kingdom. He has already

referred to himself as the bridegroom in 9:15 (and by implication in 22:1-14) and to the kingdom as a banquet or wedding feast in 8:11-12 and 22:1-14. And the lessons of the parable for us are obvious:

**i) ready and relaxed:** the wise women – like the wise builders in 7:24-27 – are ready for what's coming. The builders could face the storms that life throws at disciples because they had built their lives firmly on the solid rock of Jesus' words.

The sensible women could greet the groom's arrival even though he came while they were asleep because they had made proper preparations well ahead of time (4, 10).

But as the groom rounded the corner, the foolish women scrambled to make the preparations they should have made hours ago—but it was too late.

**ii) responsible for your own readiness:** had the foolish women said to themselves 'we'll be okay, our neighbours have enough oil for all of us?' Maybe.

The apparent selfishness of the wise women (we shouldn't over-interpret parables!) merely allows Jesus to emphasise that only we can get ourselves ready for his return. We can't rely on our family, our church, our youth group, our nation to prepare for us. If we haven't prepared, then we'll find ourselves outside in the cold.

**iii) refused entry:** the unprepared women find the doors locked and the groom—we assume that it's him rather than a household servant in v12—echoing the words of Jesus in 7:23: 'I don't know you.' It's a bleak end and a stark reading.

We need to keep watch and be ready (13; see 24:42, 44, 46, 50). And 'oil' is clearly a picture of that readiness. Oil is what lamps need to burn, so expectant and trusting faith in Jesus is what makes us ready for his coming.

## **2) responsibly working for the king (14-30)**

The second parable shifts the scene back to the household where the first parable is set. But note that again it's introduced with a verb in the future tense (14), indicating that the focus of this story is on what happens when the master returns.

The slaves are given different amounts of cash and, though the master doesn't say so, are clearly expected to trade with it and turn a profit. When the master returns, he will settle accounts with his slaves and see how much they've made for him. It was a common enough scene, householders leaving their business affairs in the hands of trusted slaves while they went away on business or attend a family or political function.

The obvious key point of this story

is that we are not inactive as we await the return of our master; we are busy being disciples and witnesses as we watch for his coming. But the story also has more specific lessons for us:

**i) lessons of history:** as the first disciples listened, they would have heard echoes of Jesus' previous denunciation of Israel's leaders—the priests, scribes and Pharisees (in 21:33-46; 23:1-36)—who had been entrusted with God's law and called to be a light to the nations and had hidden it away. Like the third slave, it wasn't so much that they'd done something wrong, as they'd done nothing with what God gave them.

And the challenge to those first hearers—and to us—is whether they would do the same with Jesus' message.

**ii) lighting up the world:** the bags of gold represent the message of the revolution entrusted to those who've embraced it. That message is not to be hidden away in our churches but to be spread around, 'traded' so that a profit—new people for the revolution—is made.

Not everyone has the same gifts or opportunities to share the message, so the outcome of each disciple's life will be different. But the parable's focus on the slave who failed to produce anything at all, clearly shows that doing nothing is not an option for us.

The failed slave is like the believer who sits comfortably in church, assured of their own salvation, but doing nothing to share that with others—their prospects are grim.

**iii) life in the Kingdom:** Not only are the faithful slaves rewarded with the master's praise (21a, 23b) but they are also given what they have earned (21b, 23b). The reward for doing well is being given more to do!

More surprisingly, the money the failed slave hid away is given to the one who has ten bags already. Even more work for the successful!

What Jesus is suggesting here is that our reward after his return is that we will be given more responsibility, more work. We will share his reign over the renewed creation. Life in the Kingdom is not a life of leisure.

This strongly suggests that our waiting for his return is similarly active, seeking to trade with what we've been given to make a profit for the kingdom, that is, calling others to be disciples as we await the return of our master.

These two parables show us what waiting is: it's about getting ourselves prepared for Jesus' return and using all our gifts and opportunities to light up the world: are we doing that?