

**Matthew 25:1-30**  
**During the delay**

**Stay ready, but use the time**

You might remember that this time last week Jenny and I had our daughter Jo and family with us. They live in Kent, something like 340 miles away, but with the improvements to the **road network** in this country over the past few decades, that can make for quite a reliable journey time of 6 hours on the roads, allowing times for stops.

So when Jo texted us last Saturday to say that they left at a certain time, we worked out that their arrival time could be just shortly after midnight. And so it proved to be. Five or ten past midnight, last Sunday morning, two sleepy grandsons were carried in and carefully tucked into their bunk beds. Pretty much the same on their way home on Thursday, too.

But I can remember back to when Exeter was three hours away, and the A30 went through so many town centres. Just getting to the other side of **Bodmin** could take an hour, whereas now it's 30 minutes, nearly all of it on dual carriageway.

And we had some family members who lived for a few years in Camberley, up in Surrey. When they came down for a holiday, they would typically come and stay with us. But their journey times were not just longer, they were also far less predictable. On several occasions, I can remember working out when they *might* have been able to arrive ... if everything had run smoothly ... and going up the road from our home to wait for them around the corner. On one occasion I think I probably spent about two hours there, just hanging around, mooching, bored, just waiting for that car to finally come around the corner with my cousins on board.

I think we face a similar dilemma when we think about the return of Jesus Christ to this world. We're told that it's certain. We're told to be ready for it - as if it could happen at any moment. But we also get some very clear hints that, at least in terms of when these things were written down, there was going to be quite a substantial delay, too.

We're even told something about how we are to regard that delay. We should expect people to mock us, perhaps mock us increasingly, for holding onto something as unworldly as Jesus Christ really literally returning in person, and winding up the history of this world at a stroke.

***... scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, ... They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."***

(2 Peter 3:3-4)

Peter gives his readers some answers to that accusation. First, **God's clock** ticks differently from ours:

***But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.***

(2 Peter 3:8)

And there is a purpose to his non-immediate return, too:

***The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.***

(2 Peter 3:9)

But that will not hold things up indefinitely, either:

***But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, ...***

(2 Peter 3:10)

So the question is, folks, as we are still in this in-between time, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to be ready and waiting like me as a little kid, just sitting on the grass and watching the empty road, or what? Jesus' followers had asked him about this, back at the beginning of the previous chapter:

***“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”***

(Matthew 24:3)

“These things” including the destruction of the Jewish Temple, just across the valley from where they were sitting. And Jesus' reply, you will hopefully remember, first of all hit on the very distinct possibility of confusion and even deception about “these things”:

***And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ...”***

(Matthew 24:4)

And it's certainly a bit confusing, remember, because Jesus' answers do not all have a clear date-stamp on them. They're like pictures, I said last time, painted without the benefit of spatial **perspective**. Are some things near in time, and loom larger on that account? Or are they further away, but only *appear* small-scale because of it? We don't have quite enough clues to nail things down unambiguously in time. But we *do* have a hint, I think, that there's going to be quite a lot of time involved. You couldn't say this for sure from the passing comment of chapter 24 ...

***“But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ...”***

(Matthew 24:48)

But when we get into this chapter 25, I think it's clear that this is more and more to be expected. In both of today's parables, we've got

***“As the bridegroom was delayed, ...”***

(Matthew 25:5)

***“Now after a long time, the master ...”***

(Matthew 25:19)

So, to my mind, Jesus is not just preparing his disciples *then* for there being a far longer wait for all “these things” happening ... but it means that he speaks more immediately to us, too, still waiting, 2000 years later, still not knowing precisely when Jesus is going to return. That means we need today’s two parables to give us the proper balance, as Jesus teaches that **awaiting his return, Jesus’ followers need to remain prepared, but also make use of the delay.**

**The bridesmaids: be ready**

**The stewards: be busy**

- **The bridesmaids: be ready (1-13)**

So Jesus has just finished that warning about a wicked servant exploiting his master’s absence, abusing his fellow servants ... but caught in the act when the master finally arrives home.

***“... the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”***

(Matthew 24:50-51)

And to emphasise this point (notice the “then”), Jesus gives us this little story based on the way they did wedding celebrations in those days.

***“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.”***

(Matthew 25:1)

Though this is a rather curious story, when you stop to think about it. Although there is clearly a wedding going on here somewhere - there’s a bridegroom - there’s no mention of the **bride!**

And just notice from this that we need to be careful not to draw out too much from it. Remember that; parables are *limited*. They are not the same as allegories, where almost everything has some secret coded meaning.

So the absence of the bride from this parable shouldn’t be taken to imply something about what some Christians call “the Rapture”, when, they say, believers - “the bride of Christ” - will be snatched out of this world to be immediately with Christ, returning seven years later with him to reign. That would be to press something far more out of this parable than Jesus ever intended to put into it, to my mind.

I think there's a much simpler explanation. There's no bride in this story simply because there doesn't *need* to be, as Jesus is intending to make the sole point about his followers being ready for his return at any moment. To make that point, the way Jewish weddings were conducted in those days meant that something involving a bridegroom and (the nearest thing we have to it nowadays) the bridesmaids ... that was all it took.

So here's the setup. **The bridegroom.** And **the bridesmaids** - couldn't find a picture with 10, but you get the drift. It's not totally clear what happened in what order in those days, as yet, but it's clearly not the same as happens in 21st-century Western weddings. From the way Jesus tells the story, it looks as if it would often be the case that the bridesmaids *and* the bridegroom went to collect the bride, probably then to make some kind of procession to some kind of celebratory venue.

And we have mention of **lamps** here too. That's a slightly confusing translation in this context, and we probably think immediately in terms of those indoor lamps that we've seen pictures of. But they would really not be a whole lot of use out of doors. So I reckon we need more in terms of **torches**, which were far more suitable for an outdoor procession.

So you've got basically a branch, with one end wrapped around with rags and given a preliminary soaking of oil. When it came to the time to light them, some further oil could be added, and that would then be enough to keep these torches ablaze - and very pretty too - for a nighttime procession down through the local streets.

The only trouble was that some of these girls were rather more forward-thinking than the others. Jesus sets the stage, very generally, with this introduction, giving the outline of what's going to happen. Now we get the detail.

***“Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.”***

(Matthew 25:2)

How does that wisdom or stupidity show itself? Bringing that extra oil - or not.

***“For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.”***

(Matthew 25:3-4)

But look, here's another way in which Jesus' society was different from ours. A bridegroom would have various things to do in order to prepare for this event, right up to the last moment, before he could come to collect the bride - and that's probably the context to what Jesus says in this famous verse:

***“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”***

(John 14:3)

But, as we all know, jobs that should be little jobs can sometimes grow. And society back then was not quite as much wedded to the clock, either. None of this *six hours driving and I'll be there*. It was much more like *I'll be there when I'm there*. Cornish people should have felt quite at home in middle-Eastern “**dreckly**” culture.

So there are the ten girls ready and waiting, I was going to say. Only no, it's *only five* that are really *ready and waiting*, the other five are just waiting. But **time draws on**, and the inevitable happens to them all.

***“As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.”***

(Matthew 25:5)

Remember, no TV or screens to keep them awake until the middle of the night. So when, somehow (we're not told; who or how is irrelevant to Jesus' purpose here), they hear that the groom is finally arriving ...

***“But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’”***

(Matthew 25:6)

Now's the moment to not just put a final brush through their hair, but to give those torches their extra boost of oil.

***“Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps.”***

(Matthew 25:7)

And now the difference emerges. They don't all have that extra oil. And there is not enough spare to go round, either. Again, don't get snagged up about whether the wise girls *should* have risked sharing their little bit of extra oil. That's just a distraction from the point Jesus is trying to make. Just follow the story line.

***“And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’”***

(Matthew 25:8-9)

Perhaps some astute local merchants were more amenable than usual to being roused out of their beds in the middle of the night because there was a wedding on ... or perhaps because they could safely charge more at anti-social hours. Amazingly, these five less-prepared girls do seem to run off into the night to see what's possible. Unfortunately, while they're flying hither and thither ...

***“And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut.”***

(Matthew 25:10)

And now here, I think, is where Jesus stretches this little parable into the rather surreal. Would latecomers really be locked out of a local wedding celebration in 1st-century Judea? I kind of doubt it. The girls would probably expect still to be let in, quietly, at the back, hiding a bit of embarrassment. But no. As so often, Jesus' parables have a distinct sting in the tail.

***“Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’”***  
(Matthew 25:11)

Not that the bridegroom is now pictured as working at a bouncer at his own wedding feast. Maybe we picture this as word being taken to him at the top table ... and an uncompromising message being sent back.

***“But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’”***  
(Matthew 25:12)

And then Jesus' conclusion to this first parable, pointing out again the necessary lesson to learn, and action to take:

***“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”***  
(Matthew 25:13)

... that “therefore” insisting that there's something in this parable that applies in this way. But I think it probably refers back not just to this parable, but into the previous chapter. You have this in the previous section:

***“Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”***  
(Matthew 24:42)

But did you notice that in today's parable, staying awake is what *didn't* happen? All of the girls fell asleep, and there's not the slightest hint there was anything wrong about that. In fact, it would be the sensible thing to do, if they are going to be partying *that* late into the night. Grab an hour if you can!

***“As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.”***  
(Matthew 25:5)

The difference here is that five of the girls had already done all they could reasonably do, with bringing the oil. So they were *ready*.

***“... the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, ...”***  
(Matthew 25:10)

So what I think this is saying is that *just* watching, by itself, doesn't cut the mustard. You “watch”, in the fullest sense, by also being prepared for the event. Not by **propping your eyes open** with matchsticks, but by bringing the oil that your torch

will need. So for us, ***watching and waiting, looking above***, as one of the hymns puts it, is not a lot of use if we're not also ***filled with his goodness***, and ***lost in his love***. Merely watching can be a distraction from also being prepared.

What would that mean? A few decades ago, Instead of spending endless hours speculating over whether the expansion of the EEC - the "Common Market", as it was in those days - to ten members was a fulfilment of one of the images in Revelation, how about getting right with a brother or sister you've been refusing to speak with for years?

Nowadays, instead of subscribing to every Prophecy Watch group you can on Facebook or Instagram, how about spending some time with someone who's finding their daily walk with Jesus very difficult at present? Just listening. Just sharing some well-chosen Scripture, and praying.

Or learning up which Scriptures would be good to use in which situations.

Or spending some time being an example of gracious godliness in your own home, instead of rushing off out to yet one more Christian meeting.

What about, as this second parable shows us, ...

- **The stewards: be busy (14-30)**

Notice the connection here: *for*

***"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property."***

(Matthew 25:14)

Yes, it's like the lead-up to a wedding feast. *And*, it's like the servants being left in charge of their master's property and business. He's a canny guy. He knows that his servants are not equally competent - or maybe just not equally confident as yet - so he allocates different levels of responsibility. Makes total sense to me.

***"To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away."***

(Matthew 25:15)

I just need to break into the telling of the story at this point, though, to make a comment about the word "talent". It's unfortunate, really, that we have that word in English nowadays, meaning a skill or aptitude. So this parable too easily becomes "Use your *talents* - the things you can do well - for Jesus." That might be what it all boils down to, but just try to keep in your head here that a *talent*, in those days, was a unit of weight, primarily, which was becoming associated with a unit of money - like our good old British ***pound***.

Only it was a quite substantial unit of weight, so when it was associated with coinage metals like gold or silver, you have an enormous sum of money. Quite possibly Jesus is talking silver here, as the money that we'll read of as being buried in the ground was literally silver - just as we have "**silver**" coinage. But it could still quite well have been gold - in which case we're talking about an amount of money that would approximate to 20 years' wages. So five talents is going to be well over a million pounds. We're talking something like *ten times* the amount of investment that the budding entrepreneurs on **The Apprentice** are scrabbling for.

And you recognise the setup, don't you? "There was an **Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman**". The vicar, the priest and the pastor. Three characters. The first two to set up a pattern, the third one to surprisingly break it. The first one of Jesus' three servants is exemplary - notice the "right away":

***"He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more."***

(Matthew 25:16)

Quite a challenge to put together a business plan to handle so much money "at once" - so this is really rather impressive. Second one, more of the same. Well, *less* of the same, but pretty similar. Same percentage profit, at least.

***"So also he who had the two talents made two talents more."***

(Matthew 25:17)

Now for not immediately the *sting* in the tail, but a bit of a twist. Number three *doesn't* continue the pattern.

***"But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money."***

(Matthew 25:18)

A quick set-up. Now for the more interesting bit - and of course, it's set up that we're automatically going to be curious about that hole-in-the-ground stuff is going to go down. It's got to be different, hasn't it? But *how* different? Let's read on.

***"Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.'"***

(Matthew 25:19-20)

No immediate surprise here. That's surely got to be met with approvingly.

***"His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"***

(Matthew 25:21)

Though possibly the degree of future greater responsibilities is a bit of an eye-opener. Folks, do you ever stop and consider what “much” might be for you and me? Or were you just thinking that heaven is supposed to be eternal rest - like an extended retirement but with the typical energy and health and all-round vigour of your twenties again?

***“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’”***

(Matthew 25:21)

Second guy ... perhaps not *totally* predictable, in that he gets that same promise of reward. Identical words!

***“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’”***

(Matthew 25:21)

So is that just like a kid who is just a bit younger at school, and who is actually in time going to become just as proficient at reading as the other kid who’s just now that bit older and more advanced? Are things going to even up when it comes to heaven, do you think? Or will we just be totally content there despite maybe having different levels of abilities or responsibilities?

But put that speculation aside until later. Here’s the crunch point. Servant number three, with a totally different approach to risk. And rather forthright in his assessment of his master’s character, too. Not overburdened with tact, I’d say.

***“He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’”***

(Matthew 25:24-25)

I can just see him dumping that on the table, can’t you, or maybe the ground at his master’s feet? There’s a lot that is unattractive in those words and the attitudes they seem to be betraying. Lazy? Resentful? Sullen? Risk-averse? His view of the master he is serving is totally at odds with the one we have just seen delighting over the first two servants’ success.

Folks, is it possible that at times your image of God is telling us more about yourself than about God? If you think he’s mean and overbearing ... what does that say about you? If you think he’s a spoilsport, what does that say about you? If you think that he’s just concerned about you keeping a set of rules ... what does that say about you?

I can't say I'm surprised that this is the guy entrusted with a "mere" half million, if he's full of attitude like this. You could say that he's at least dutiful: he didn't go and waste it all like the Prodigal Son! In fact, I wonder if Jesus could be implying that this is just like the Pharisees. They had kept God's word intact and pure - they were obsessed with it. Every rule that they could extract from it, they would labour to keep - though missing, as Jesus had said not long previously,

***"... you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness."***

(Matthew 23:23)

And although they might have claimed they were watching out for the coming of the Messiah, when he *did* come, they were far from ready and prepared to receive him. Here's the one they had in principle been waiting for, and when he arrives, all they can do is say, *Here you are, I've kept all the rules.*

So just like the Pharisees, this third servant is self-condemned. That's what happens with so many people who reject Jesus Christ. They don't want grace, they just want recognition for doing their dutiful bit. That should be enough, shouldn't it? *I've not been any worse than the next man, have I? What more can you expect?*

Well, I don't think *anyone* expected what came next in Jesus' story. Yes, the guy is self-condemned, and the master's response explains quite calmly that, *well, if you know I'm that mean, didn't you have a lot of incentive to get at least some interest on my investment?*

***"But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest.'"***

(Matthew 25:26-27)

See, the thought is the same again: this man is not prepared for what he *knows* must happen when his master returns, just as the five silly bridesmaids also must have been able to work out what they would need when the bridegroom finally arrived.

But this is now getting seriously weird again, right at the end of the parable.

***"So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents."***

(Matthew 25:28)

This, I suspect, is to show how the grace of God works. And remember, even if you don't get that, that this master has already called five talents - 2 million pounds plus - chicken feed. So another talent here or there ... no big deal!

***"For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance."***

(Matthew 25:29)

Live by grace, and receive even more grace.

***“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”***

(Luke 6:37-38)

But try to live by the letter of the law - ignoring grace - and you lose *big*.

***“But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”***

(Matthew 25:29-30)

Folks, watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord isn't just about obsessing over Bible prophecies, but preparing ourselves for that time when he will stand again upon the earth.

Like the wise bridesmaids, we need to be prepared, living lives that are already manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit, growing in grace, growing in righteousness, because the place we are going to be taken to ...

***But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.***

(2 Peter 3:13)

And like the busy servants, entrusted with goods beyond anything they could ever lay claim to, we need to be busy, and be daring. Invest your time, your thoughts, your lives, your hearts, into things that you know are the interests of your absent master. So that when he returns, he may receive the return on his investments.

And folks, we are promised something better than talents of gold, in following Jesus Christ. Stay ready. Use the time well. And remember this promised invitation:

***“Enter into the joy of your master.”***

(Matthew 25:21,23)

**Stay ready, but use the time**