MATTHEW 25:1–13. (EHV)

> "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. When the foolish ones took their lamps, they did not take any oil with them; but the wise took oil in their containers with their lamps. While the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, 'No, there may not be enough for us and for you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were away buying oil, the bridegroom came. Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. Later, the other virgins also came and said, 'Lord, Lord, let us in.' But he answered, 'Amen I tell you: I do not know you.' Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

The running shoes lie in the back of the shelf in the closet. What happened? Someone didn't persevere in her commitment to run a mile every day.

Half the garage is clean and half is cluttered, so the whole garage still looks cluttered. What happened? Someone didn't persevere in his decision to clean his garage.

The bookmark in the *Meditations* is on October 8, not November 8. What happened? Someone didn't persevere in reading his devotion every morning.

The email inbox was down to 200 emails at one time, but now it numbers over 2,000. What happened? Someone didn't persevere in his resolve to file or delete immediately after reading.

Not persevering in something has different degrees of consequences, depending on the importance of the activity in which we were supposed to persevere. But there is one activity that we *must* all persevere in, because its consequences are eternal. We must keep on watching for Jesus's return.

1.

"*At that time* the kingdom of heaven will be like…" says Jesus. At what time? Jesus has just been talking about how we must always keep watch because we do not know the day or the hour he will return. But he knows that if that is the only reason for continued watching that he provides, it will be a weak encouragement.

After all, if you were to tell me, "Pastor Biebert, always be ready, because you don't know when I'm going to show up at your door and ask you to play 'Chopsticks' on the piano," I guarantee that I would not regularly practice Chopsticks until then. In fact, I wouldn't practice it at all. Not only is it one of those easy pieces that almost anyone with any familiarity with the piano can play at any time, but even if I couldn't, I think I would survive the ten seconds of embarrassment.

So what if Jesus's return were like that? An easy thing? Something to take lightly, because the consequences weren't that serious? Then the encouragement to keep watch because we don't know when he's coming wouldn't be a very powerful encouragement.

So Jesus continues by telling us what it's going to be like at that time, the time when he returns.

He tells a parable about ten virgins, five foolish and five wise. These virgins were waiting near the house where the wedding feast would be held. It was customary on the wedding day for the bridegroom, accompanied by friends, to go and fetch his bride from her father's house. After the bride's father spoke a few words of blessing, the wedding procession would get underway from the bride's father's house to the home of the bridegroom, or sometimes the home of the bridegroom's father. There the wedding banquet took place in the evening.

So these virgins were waiting for the bridegroom and the rest of the procession to arrive. They were the welcoming party who would help mark the location of the wedding banquet with their lamps in the dim evening hours, and who would then go in and set up their lamps to provide light for the banquet and the guests.

We don't know exactly what these lamps looked like, but perhaps we should imagine them more like torches made from oil-soaked rags. The five foolish virgins thought that the oil their rags were already soaked in would be enough, whereas the five wise ones brought along extra oil just in case.

Well, the wedding procession was a long time in coming and all ten became drowsy and fell asleep. Finally at midnight—much, much later than expected—they were suddenly awakened by the cry, "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" All of the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps, that is, cut off or otherwise removed the charred portions of their rags and made them look as nice as possible. The wise virgins were also able to re-soak their rags with their extra oil, whereas the foolish virgins realized that their lamps were going out and they were not going to have enough to last for the remaining festivities.

The foolish ones nervously asked the wise ones to share some of their oil, but the wise ones had only made provision for themselves and only had enough for themselves. "You'd better go to those who sell oil and get some more," they said.

So the foolish virgins hurried off to the merchants. But in the meantime the bridegroom arrived with his bride and the rest of the wedding party and they went in to the wedding banquet. And Jesus then says these momentous words: "And the door was shut."

And that is how the foolish ones found the door when they came back. And though they knocked and cried out, "Lord, Lord, let us in!" the answer they got from the bridegroom was, "Amen I tell you: I do not know you." It was too late now.

Some of the elements of this parable are not difficult to figure out. The bridegroom of course is Jesus. And so in this parable it really doesn't matter whether the house he brings his bride to is his own house or his father's house, because we know Jesus and God the Father both have the same house.

The wedding banquet hall is heaven, where God dwells, and the wedding banquet itself represents the eternal and supreme joys of heaven.

The oil is God's word, particularly the gospel or good news about Jesus. David sings in Psalm 18, "*You*, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; *my God* turns my darkness into light." And recall the familiar words of Psalm 119:105: "*Your word* is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

The gospel is the fuel for the lamps, which represent faith in Jesus. Jesus said, "Let your light," that is, your faith, "shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). When faith is not fueled with the oil of God's word, its light burns out.

But what about the virgins? At first, we might be tempted to think that the five wise virgins are believers and the five foolish virgins are unbelievers. Actually, that's right, but the disturbing thing is where these particular unbelievers come from.

Virgins represent purity. All of these virgins knew the bridegroom was coming, and all of them were waiting for him. You don't normally think of unbelievers that way, do you? In terms of purity? In terms of actually knowing and waiting for Jesus? The only difference between these virgins is that only five of them were ready all the way until the bridegroom arrived.

We can also look back and see that Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives talking to *his disciples*. There are no Pharisees in the audience. No teachers of the law. No practicing adulterers or thieves. Just disciples.

A little uncomfortable yet? These ten virgins represent the visible Christian Church. All the virgins in this parable, the wise and the foolish, represent us. Not anyone "out there." Everyone in here. The ten virgins represent people who call themselves Christian and are familiar with Christian doctrine. They, at least at some point, know that Jesus is coming again and are watching for him.

At least at some point. But not all the way to the end. Not all of them. In fact—and we obviously can't push the details too far here and say that Jesus is teaching us an exact percentage—but isn't it a little unsettling that of the ten virgins representing the visible Christian Church, half of them end up on the outside of heaven looking in on Judgment Day? Half end up as unbelievers. Picture that—every other one of us on the outside of heaven looking in.

How? What happens to half the virgins? They do not persevere to the end. They make it to 6 p.m., 8 p.m., 10 p.m., when they should have made it to midnight.

In which camp do you fall, friends, foolish or wise? In which camp *will* you fall when Jesus comes?

Are you being wise for the long haul? When young members get confirmed and then only rarely come back to church, if at all, what is going on? They and their parents are only making 6 p.m. plans—"Just get confirmed *or* Just get them confirmed"—instead of making plans to help them persevere until midnight.

Are you being wise for the long haul? What's going to happen to you when your life gets busier? Are you going to use that as an excuse to omit personal and family devotions, an excuse to drift away from God? Are you going to consider yourself fortunate that you don't have to sit through that boring hour of worship anymore? And if that happens, do you know why? It will be because you only made 8 p.m. plans, instead of plans to persevere until midnight.

Are you being wise for the long haul? What's going to happen when you see your spouse going off to church week after week and you think to yourself, "Well, it's good enough that she's going, or that he's going"? "Give us some of your oil," the foolish virgins said. "No," the wise ones replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you." A person cannot believe on behalf of someone else. No one is going to be saved through the faith of another.

Are you being wise for the long haul? What's going to happen to you if your father or son or granddaughter or spouse dies tragically or naturally? What's going to happen when the tornado destroys your property? When prices skyrocket? When disease hits? When your children force you out of your own home into a nursing home? Are you going to curse God and cut off ties with church? Stop listening to his Word? And if that happens, do you know why? It will be because you only made 10 p.m. plans, instead of plans to persevere until midnight.

And what will be the result of your failing to persevere? Something much worse than a growing waistline, which might happen if you didn't persevere in running every day. Something much worse than a cluttered garage, which might happen if you didn't persevere in cleaning. Something much worse than an unmanageable email inbox, which might happen if you didn't persevere in filing and deleting.

"And the door was shut." At a Jewish wedding banquet, blessings were spoken, wine was enjoyed, delicious food was relished, songs were sung, humorous tales were told, and for a virgin couple, the party lasted for seven days. That sounds like a grand time. What then will heaven's wedding banquet be like? What sorts of blessings will be spoken? What sorts of food enjoyed? What sorts of songs sung? Imagine all the stories that will be told! And no seven-day limit! A banquet without end!

Imagine—to be shut out from that forever! Hell enough!

That might be hell enough, but think also of this: When have you felt the most foolish? Isn't it when the right course of action was the most clear and obvious one, the one right there in front of you the entire time, and you still didn't do it? You later smack your forehead and say, "What a dope I was!"

What kind of sinking feeling, then, will people who were once Christians have? People who had the truth, but who did not persevere in it? People for whom the right course of action was always right there in front of them, and now they are shut out from the best thing imaginable for good? Wouldn't *that feeling* be hell enough?

That might be hell enough, but think also of this: Think of all the times Jesus heard people crying out to him, and even if he was tired or mourning or traveling or busy or had other plans, the cries would tug at his heart and he would help them. Jesus speaks this parable during Holy Week while he is in the vicinity of Jerusalem. A few days earlier as he was approaching Jerusalem, two blind men shouted out after him, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" At first Jesus seemed to ignore them and the crowd told them to hush, but they shouted all the louder, and Jesus had to stop. He cannot ignore the cries of those in need. He gave them their sight.

But here? "Lord, Lord, let us in!"

"Amen I tell you: I do not know you."

Imagine—a day when cries coming from the most profound agony and disappointment no longer move Jesus one bit.

Christian, keep on watching. See the agony that awaits you if you do not.

2.

Ah, and see the joy that awaits you if you do!

Go back to that picture of a wedding banquet. Go back to that picture especially of singing. The kind of singing I'm imagining taking place at this Jewish wedding banquet is hard to illustrate. Can you remember what it's like standing and singing the final hymn on Easter? Or have you ever been to a party with good friends who had maybe had one or two beers, but were not drunk and were not going to be, and almost spontaneously you just started singing some familiar song together? Maybe you didn't even really know what the words meant, but you sang it out anyway, and the rafters rang.

The singing in heaven…! Great Christian composers like Johann Sebastian Bach will be there, whom even many unbelievers think was the greatest composer ever to live, but there will be music better than his! The best Christian instrumentalists of all time will be there, but the instruments of heaven will be like nothing you've ever heard or seen before! The best Christian choristers will be there, but your voice will not sound at all inferior to theirs!

And the door will be shut for good. No end to the feasting. No end to the singing. No end to the joy. No more mistakes or regrets. No more death or mourning or crying or pain. No more sin. Forever.

And Jesus will be with you on the inside of the door.

And when you stop to think about it, making plans to persevere until the end so that you are on the inside really isn't that difficult, is it? Make sure you have enough oil. Make sure you are making regular use of God's word. Look for opportunities to read and study it. Look for opportunities to listen to it, to make use of the public ministry through which it is proclaimed. Seize those opportunities. It isn't like this is a book filled with burdensome instructions. It is nothing more or less than God's wedding invitation to you, signed in his name with the blood of his Son—the blood which has removed all the reasons that he would have for keeping any one of us off the invitation list. And this invitation, this oil, doesn't cost you a thing.

So keep on watching. Keep on fueling the torch of your faith with the oil of the gospel. See the agony that awaits you if you don't. See the joy that awaits you if you do. Amen.