

## Be prepared

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It's easy to read the parable of the ten virgins as a tribute to two core American values: individualism and meritocracy.

Individualism imagines the kingdom of heaven like this: "I got mine," the five wise virgins say to the foolish ones, "so you get your own." That sounds like our culture, which encourages us to "look out for number one." Hearing the parable this way affirms a selfish individualism, rather than the mind of Christ—who came to seek the lost, to serve the neighbor, to lay down his life for his friends.

Meritocracy imagines the kingdom of heaven like this: "Everybody finally gets what they deserve. The wise virgins looked out for number one and earned their delight by being prepared. The foolish virgins, who played when they should have been working, deserved their despair." That sounds like our culture's approbation of ingenuity and effort, but it doesn't sound like the kingdom of God. The password for entrance into the kingdom has never been "try harder," and the kingdom's economy has never been one of scarcity ("If I share with you, I won't have enough"). Instead, the kingdom of heaven is about an abundance, given to all.

So how might we read the parable as Christians called to serve, love and give? First, as a warning against distraction and a call to attentiveness. "Keep awake" is the repeated refrain of Matthew 24, as well as the parable's exclamation point in chapter 25. "Keep awake"—be prepared. Don't lose focus or lose heart. This points in the direction not of scarcity but rather of *receiving* the urgent call of the kingdom, of living in the now and the not yet.

This is a warning and an exhortation made necessary by waiting. The bridegroom was delayed, is delayed still. We've been waiting a long time for the coming of the kingdom and the return of our king. Sustaining hope for the long haul is difficult in a culture saturated with sound bites, permeated with possibilities, awash in advertising. The real enemy of our hope in Christ isn't despair or disappointment but

dissipation, distraction and drowsiness. Keep awake! For it is only in wakefulness that we receive God's good gifts in the now and prepare for the not yet.

This is what we seek to hear, time after time. Not a new word from God, but Christ's consistent word of warning: Stay awake! Don't lose heart; don't lose faith; don't lose hope. Stay awake, because the best is yet to come.

Biblical warnings are consistently tied to promises, and here the promise is simple: Christ will come. We know neither the day nor the hour, but the promise's emphasis is not on knowing. Nor is it on scarcity or individualism or merit. The emphasis is on *preparation*. The oil in this story is akin to the oil placed on the forehead of the priests, the oil with which we anoint one another, *preparing* one another for our priestly call. This oil is a gift, given to each, and represents the abundant promises of God.

And so we don't sleep. We pay attention. We live, love and serve in the expectation that Christ will come. Later in Matthew 25, Jesus tells us exactly what this paying attention looks like. It is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and those in prison. And the kingdom of heaven will be like this: a wedding banquet, a feast with our Lord, the entrance into eternal life. Who could sleep through that? Thanks be to God.