

I love to grill; it's a big part of why I love summer so much. And partly because I'm a sucker for the expedient, and partly because charcoal is tough to get right, I use propane. (I know, I know. I just alienated half of you. Bear with me.) This is a propane tank. [\[hold up the tank\]](#) Most of them come with a sweet indicator on the side to let you know how full they are. The problem is that the last new propane tank was manufactured I think sometime in the early 1940s. Because none of the propane tanks I've ever used has had a working indicator.

One of the worst feelings in the world is having some chicken breasts or nice steaks on the grill and realizing that they're not cooking. You look down into the grill and see the fire is just barely burning. With mounting horror, you fiddle with the gas noobs and nothing's happening.

You're out of gas mid-grill. That walk of shame inside, to pull out a baking sheet or frying pan is the worst. Because you weren't prepared. You didn't take the necessary steps to make sure you were ready to prepare the feast. So now instead of grilling your meat outside over a fire like God intended, you have to cook it on a stove.

That idea of preparedness is tough for us. Our culture prefers to live in the moment, to address immediate concerns and only consider the long-term if we have time (which we never do). You can see it at the national level, in how we approach national debt and national security. In parenting, how easy is it to do what works in the moment over what's going to form a good, long-term habit in our children? In our relationships: we'll avoid having honest, important conversations because it's too hard, too painful - we opt for short-term comfort and long-term relational damage.

Even in our spirituality, we tend not to consider God except on Sundays, church days, when "spiritual stuff" is right in front of us. We like the *idea* of spiritual activities that form us, that help us to be more attentive to God in our everyday life, but those are usually the first thing to go when time is tight.

The reality is our schedules are packed so full we don't have *time* for forethought. We're held captive to the immediate. Or, to use one of my favorite phrases, we're held captive to the tyranny of the urgent. Whatever matters NOW is what gets our attention. Later can wait till later.

But we all know that sometimes, later is too late. And when it's something relatively minor - like running out of propane when I'm grilling, maybe it's not that big a deal. But when we're talking about our finances, our kids, our nation, our *lives*, we owe it to ourselves, to our families, to each other to do better than live in the moment.

This is actually my extra propane tank. We keep it at the house specifically to avoid this problem. Because I've learned to be prepared (yes, from the Boy Scouts, since you asked). And I have to tell you, keeping this extra tank has made my grilling life a lot easier.

According to Jesus, choosing to be prepared isn't just a good idea for backyard barbecues. Turn in your bibles with me to Matthew 25. If you grabbed one of our bibles on the way in, it's on page XXXX. If you don't own a Bible, we would be honored if you'd consider that one a gift from us.

This summer, we've been exploring the stories Jesus used to teach us about God's kingdom. These parables are short and provocative, designed to invite us to consider the nature of God's new life

and how we are participating in it. During June, each of the parables had to do with the nature of God's Kingdom - how it's found in the small, the ordinary, the everyday.

During July, we'll hear stories about how to wait for God's kingdom. If you were here in the Spring, you know that we talked about the gap between Jesus' resurrection and his return. This is the gap these parables speak to as well. Before he left, Jesus was concerned that we know how to wait well.

And today's parable is all about being prepared. About why we can't afford to wait till later to embrace the life God invites us into. Let's hear Jesus' story, beginning in verse 1:

Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The five who were foolish didn't take enough olive oil for their lamps, but the other five were wise enough to take along extra oil. When the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight they were roused by the shout, 'Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!' All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. Then the five foolish ones asked the others, 'Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.'

But the others replied, 'We don't have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.'

But while they were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came. Then those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was locked. Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, 'Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!'

But he called back, 'Believe me, I don't know you!'

So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of my return.
-- Matthew 25:1-13

I'm going to assume you've been to a few (hundred) weddings. So you hear this parable and think... uh, what? None of this sounds like familiar wedding culture. Well except the huge wedding party. So let's get a little context to help us make sense of the story:

In the ancient world, there was no such thing as a nuclear family. Families lived in huge three-generation homes. [illustrate all this!] You'd have a father, all his sons, their wives and all their children all living technically under one roof. When a son was ready to marry, his father would arrange a marriage. Until the wedding, the groom-to-be lived in his father's house and the bride-to-be in her father's house.

Once the marriage was arranged, the groom-to-be was expected to build a space for him and his bride to live together in his father's house. So essentially, he was responsible to build an addition onto the house. And the wedding didn't take place until that addition was ready. Until the couple's new home was finished.

So you can imagine - building back then wasn't any more predictable than it is today. They couldn't know exactly when the wedding was going to take place. They'd have a general idea, obviously, but the bride's family, who's hosting the wedding, couldn't send out invitations or anything.

So - if you're part of the bride's family - you waited. And when the groom finished, all his people would gather because the party was getting ready to start and they'd all head to the bride's father's house for the wedding (often a village or two away). And they'd send runners ahead to announce, It's time! It's time!

And the bride's family had been waiting, expecting this moment, so in theory they'd be prepared: they'd send their messengers out to invite everyone and they'd get the feast ready to go and everything would be ready by the time the groom and his people showed up. The bridesmaids would go out to greet them, and lead them to where the wedding was set up, and then they'd party for a week or so, and somewhere in there, the couple would marry.

That helps us get oriented in this story: the bridesmaids are waiting. An ancient listener would know the wedding is happening soon – the bridesmaids don't know when exactly, but soon. And the groom has finished his addition, so he's coming with all his people.

The messenger shows up announcing that the groom is on his way. He wakes the bridesmaids up, and now we see the problem: half of them were prepared for the delay. They were prepared to wait. They bought extra oil so their lamps could stay lit through the night. [pic of oil lamp?] But the other half weren't prepared. For whatever reason, they didn't bring enough oil.

They have to run out to get more oil - which is hard to do because apparently this village did not have a 24-hour Wal-Mart. So by the time they get their oil situation sorted, they're too late. They've missed the party. The wedding started without them.

It's obvious the focus of this story is those 10 bridesmaids. And it's clear that whatever this oil is matters. Jesus often uses the wedding metaphor to describe himself. He's the groom, we are the bride. And the wedding day is the day he returns. That's why he begins the parable by saying "Then the kingdom of Heaven will be like..." Not now, but then, when he returns for his bride.

So right now, we're the bridesmaids. We're waiting for the groom, for Jesus to return. The question the parable begs is, Which bridesmaid are you? Are you prepared or not?

And we think, Hm. I'm really not sure. What does it mean to be prepared?

We can quickly say what it doesn't mean: Being prepared for Jesus to come back doesn't mean stopping everything you're doing, leaving your everyday life to become a crazy apocalyptic Christian. It doesn't mean you have to stand out on the street wearing a sign that says The End is Near! and shout through a bullhorn at people to Repent! [pic?]

Did you notice that the bridesmaids were all sleeping? All 10 of them! And *of course* they were. It's midnight. Especially in the ancient world (before electric lights and televisions), sleeping is just what you did at midnight. When you didn't know exactly when the wedding would happen, everyday life couldn't just grind to a halt.

That's so different from wedding culture today, with our fixed dates and save-the-dates and invitations, it might be more helpful to think of how we prepare for the birth of a child. The due date is a lot more like the wedding date of the ancient world. You hope that's when it's going to happen, but you just don't know for sure.

So when you're expecting a child, you prepare. You figure out the fastest routes to the hospital. You pack a bag with everything you're going to need at the hospital and leave it by the door (or in the car!). You get the nursery ready. And then you wait.

But you don't stop everything. You still have to go to work. You still do all the regular things in your life. But always in the background is the understanding that at any moment you're going to have to stop everything because IT'S TIME!

Can you imagine not preparing at all? Waiting until that first contraction to start trying to figure out what needs to be packed up? Getting caught in traffic because you didn't think about what time of day it was or how the roads would be? Rushing out of the office with everyone wondering where the fire is because you didn't bother to tell anyone you were having a baby?

Foolish, isn't it?

That's how an ancient listener would've thought of these 5 bridesmaids who didn't get some extra oil. They know the wedding is happening. And they know that they don't know exactly when. The time to prepare isn't once the groom's here. It's before, while you wait.

Preparing *is* waiting well. It's being ready so you don't miss the party.

Because, according to Jesus, if you're not prepared, you miss out.

That seems harsh to our ears. We want Jesus to say, Hey, it doesn't matter! Do whatever you want and show up whenever you want!

But we know that's not how life works. When we don't prepare, we're not ready for the party. When we don't prepare, we miss out. Not because God keeps us out, but because we're not capable of participating. We're missing God.

No one who's a bridesmaid or a groomsman would want to miss the wedding. How much more then, does Jesus' story ring true about the new life he offers? He will return, and when he does, if you're not prepared, you'll miss out. Not because you're not invited, not because you're not in the wedding party, but because you didn't make yourself ready.

So how do we prepare? How do we make sure we have enough oil, so to speak? Well it's no coincidence that the early church used the oil lamp as a symbol for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables us to live in God's new world. The Spirit gives us God's new life. Our responsibility, our response to Jesus' invitation, is to make ourselves available to the Spirit. To ensure we keep our lamps full of oil. Or, we might say, make sure we're always cooking with gas.

Jesus invites us to follow him. To choose to accept his invitation is to *choose* to follow him. It's also to choose not to follow other paths. We choose to leave behind the destructive, selfish habits and desires that characterized us before and we allow the Spirit to make us look more like Jesus.

In Galatians, Paul tells us that to live by the Spirit means we follow the Spirit's leading in *every part* of our lives.

This is where we get tripped up. We don't make room to be attentive to the Spirit. We don't make space in our lives for the Spirit to lead us. We don't keep our tanks full of gas, our lamps full of oil.

And when we don't make room in our lives for the Spirit, is it any wonder we don't live like Jesus? We're trying to cook without propane. And Jesus warns us in this parable that he is coming back. If we want to come to the wedding, we need to prepare ourselves, begin participating in what Jesus is doing now, follow the Spirit's lead.

That's actually really good news. Because Jesus said, *Then* the Kingdom of Heaven will be like... The Kingdom isn't like that yet. It's like Jesus is busting in on the Bridesmaids early and saying HEY! Make sure you have enough oil!

To us, Jesus says, HEY! The old world is passing away. Get out while you can, so you don't go with it!

Brothers and sisters, this is good news. It's a chance to choose life. To say Yes to God's invitation to join in restoring creation to the way it was always meant to be.

You can choose to live by the Spirit. You can choose not to be defined by those destructive desires and habits. You can choose to begin living now a life that will echo in the halls of eternity. It starts by heeding Jesus' warning, by saying Yes to his invitation to be prepared. It starts by making yourself available to the Spirit.

So how do we do it? How do we make ourselves available to the Spirit?

Here at Beavercreek Nazarene, we follow two thousand years' worth of people who've been on the same journey we're on, following Jesus into God's new reality. Those fellow travelers have identified dozens of practices that help us to be more available to the Spirit. Out of those dozens of Spiritual Practices I want to give you two to do this week: reading Scripture and a Prayer of Examine.

If something we've talked about today has stirred your soul, if you sense the Spirit inviting you to make room for her in your life this week, then these two practices are a simple next step for you.

If you didn't grab one of these bulletins on the way in, you can get one as you leave. In here are a couple of short passages of Scripture that relate to what we've talked about today. None of them will take you more than about 5 minutes to read. This week, choose to spend 5 minutes reading the Bible every day. 5 minutes. That's all.

The other practice is the Prayer of Examine. It's an opportunity to pause at the beginning and end of your day and remember to make yourself available to the Spirit. The Examine is also printed in

your bulletin (or if you're listening to the podcast, you can download it at our website, bcnaz.com).

An examine also takes only a few minutes. Every day this week, begin and end your day with a few minutes of prayerful reflection on your day.

Read Scripture and pray. This is a small, simple step. But as we talked about last month, the Kingdom of Heaven is found in these small, simple steps. Jesus promises that if we make ourselves available to be transformed, the Spirit will produce a miraculous harvest in us, Spiritual fruit to nourish our souls, our families, our friends and our world.

So what're you waiting for?

Close with Examine

1. Where did I resist the Spirit last week?
2. Where did I work with the Spirit last week?
3. Where might I be tempted to resist the Spirit this week?
4. Where can I work with the Spirit this week?