“A Call to Urgency”
Matthew 25:1–13
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
November 8, 2026

I’m not sure exactly how old I was, but I have a vivid memory from somewhere in my mid-teens of hearing a Gospel song entitled “One Day Too Late.” I did not like it. As many of you know, I had not grown up in church, both my parents had given up on the institution, and I was just beginning to explore Christian faith. So, my views were not fully formed, but I did know immediately that I did not like the use of fear to inspire faith. The song talks about someone who finally came to call Jesus’ name, but it was one day too late. So, they were left behind. “Nonsense!” I thought, “That doesn’t fit with everything I have been learning about Jesus!” And over fifty years later, I still feel this way.

And yet, we have this reading from Matthew 25 about ten young women taking their lamps to meet the bridegroom, five of them wise, five of them foolish; five of them prepared and ready for whenever the bridegroom, who is Jesus, arrives, and five not. When the bridegroom arrives, the wise and prepared women enter the banquet hall with him, but the door is shut in the faces of the foolish who are not yet ready. It seems like the latter are one day too late. Is Jesus trying to frighten his disciples into following him more faithfully? I don’t think so, but if he is not, what exactly is he doing? How do we make sense of this story?

We begin by remembering that it is a parable, not a historical narrative, and one of several delivered near the end of Jesus’ ministry about Judgment Day. It is worth noting that this one is set in the context of a wedding banquet, an occasion filled with powerful emotion. So, the story is meant to move us in some way.

The ten women, who are called bridesmaids in some translations, though the word literally means “virgins,” have lamps for which the wise bring oil and the foolish do not. We know what this means. We have two oil candles on our altar table. If they run out of oil, they will

not burn, which makes an acolyte's work difficult and offers a poor sign of the Spirit. A prepared wedding attendant will have enough oil.

When the bridegroom arrives, the wise women trim their lamps, another detail we get. If the wicks are too long, our candles burn high and create too much smoke. These women want to have everything just right for the bridegroom. The foolish ask the wise if they can borrow some of their oil but they do not have enough to share. So, the former go in search of oil but it takes too long to find some. The prepared are welcomed to the banquet; the unprepared are not.

So, as we have noted, the bridegroom is Jesus. The women are those who seek to follow him faithfully. This requires patience, faithful waiting for an unknown period, as well as preparedness, which half the followers do well and half do not. The former join the great banquet in eternity while the latter do not. "Keep awake, therefore," Jesus says after concluding the parable, "for you know neither the day nor the hour."

It's an odd comment because all ten women fall asleep. What distinguishes one half from the other is their level of preparedness to greet the one who comes to usher them into eternity. Perhaps the calling is to remain "awake" in a general sense, alert, prepared for Christ's coming. But no matter how we read the parable, there is a hard reality at the end of it. Some are found to be faithful, and some are not.

But what is Jesus' purpose in telling this parable? We could conclude that Jesus is trying to frighten his followers into greater faithfulness, but we can worship the devil out of fear. I don't think frightening people is the intent, but Jesus is trying to get his disciples' attention. He wants to startle them into a greater sense of urgency about spiritual things. They need to be prepared and they must not delay.

As Christian educator Lindsay P. Armstrong notes, we have a tendency to think we always have more time to accomplish any important task – rebuild a broken relationship, learn a skill, offer a word of gratitude or forgiveness, replace a bad habit with a good one, achieve an important goal, change careers, deepen our relationship with God, contribute to society, spend time with a child, faithfully follow Christ. We put off for today what we can accomplish tomorrow, ever assuming we have more time (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, p. 289).

But do we? And even if we do, we don't get back time we have spent poorly. I have told some of you about an evening when Ian was young and I was writing my dissertation while working 60–70 hours a week. Apparently, I hadn't been home while Ian was awake for some time because after I read him a story and tucked him into bed, he said to Dana, "Daddy came to visit my house today." In this same period, Dana said she had a dream that our dog Fosdick died in the backyard and lay there a month because I was too busy to move his body.

The dissertation was important, but I wasn't close to the deadline for writing it. I had responsibilities as a pastor, but there is always more work to do in ministry every day of the week. Wise clergy draw a line somewhere. Some of us are wiser than others, and earlier in life than others. We may or may not figure out a better balance in the future, but even if we do, we don't get back any time from the past.

Jesus may not be trying to frighten us, but he is trying to startle us into a greater sense of urgency about things that matter, especially our faithfulness to him. The question is — how do we become more faithful? How do we prepare for this bridegroom? What does it mean to bring our oil and trim our lamps? It requires time for study and reflection, prayer and devotion; it includes space for worship and praise; but most importantly, it involves living as Jesus has taught us to live.

We might view the task in light of our reading from Amos. In his typically direct manner, the prophet says the people should not be excited about the day of Lord coming near. It will not bring good news for them because while they gather to celebrate the rituals of their faith, they are not living as God wants them to live. God despises their worship not because the songs are bad or the liturgy is inadequate but because they are not treating other people right. God wants justice to roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Justice, *mishpat*, is doing what is right, as if following a court ruling, while righteousness, *sedaqa*, is about living in right relationship with God and other people. Right living grows out of right relationships, and God desires that justice be a mighty force like the floods after a heavy rain and righteousness be as constant as streams that never dry up.

That's how we make sure we are prepared for the coming of Christ not just at some unknown future date of consummation but in all the ways Christ enters our lives in times of joy and sorrow, in routine moments and critical turning points. We deepen our connection to God and each other and then pursue God's desire for a more just and peaceful world. We feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, love our enemy, and we do so *today*, not tomorrow, because as our hymn of discipleship says, all days are days of judgment, and the Lord is waiting still.

It is a difficult message to hear in a privileged culture like ours where faith is just a small part of our busy lives. It will take something to startle us, to help us recognize the urgency of our calling. Time is of the essence. We need to keep our lamps trimmed and burning. We must not delay in doing what is right, what we know we need to do.

In his book *Prayers* Michel Quoist put it this way (pp. 97–99).

You understand Lord, they simply haven't the time.
The child is playing, she hasn't time right now… Later on…
The schoolboy has his homework to do, he hasn't time… Later on…
The student has her courses, and so much work… Later on…
The young man is at his sports, he hasn't time… Later on…
The young married couple have their new house; they have to fix it up. They haven't time… Later on…
The grandparents have their grandchildren. They haven't time… Later on…
They are ill, they have their treatments, they haven't time… Later on…
They are dying, they have no…
Too late! ... They have no more time!

And so all men (and women) run after time, Lord.
They pass through life running — hurried, jostled, overburdened, frantic, and they never get there. They haven't time.
In spite of all their efforts they're still short of time,
Of a great deal of time.
Lord, you must have made a mistake in your calculations.

There is a big mistake somewhere.
The hours are too short,
The days are too short,
Our lives are too short.

You who are beyond time, Lord, must smile to see us fighting it.
And you know what you are doing.
You make no mistakes in your distribution of time to men (and women).
You give each one time to do what you want him (or her) to do.
But we must not lose time,
waste time,
kill time,
For time is a gift that you give us,
But a perishable gift,
A gift that does not keep.

Lord, I have time,
I have plenty of time,
All the time that you give me,
The years of my life,
The days of my years,
The hours of my days,
They are all mine.
Mine to fill, quietly, calmly,
But to fill completely, up to the brim,
To offer them to you, that of their insipid water
You may make a rich wine such as you made once in Cana of Galilee.
I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time to do this and then that,
But your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me, what you want me to do.

It is a worthy prayer for us all.