

MATTHEW 25:1-13

HOW ARE YOUR GRADES?

NOV. 12, 2023

Rev. John R. Annable, University Baptist Church

The title of my sermon this morning has nothing to do with the fact that students will soon be facing finals. But, having taken many of final exam in my lifetime I can assure you that there was often a little anxiety associated with final exams. I often wondered if I had really mastered the material well enough to do well enough to get the grade I wanted.

I read about a pastor in seminary preparing to be a pastor of a church. He relates this event. In his words he said:

Back in 1960s, I was at Yale Divinity School. It was the 60s and Yale wanted to be known as a thoroughly progressive school. So, we received absolutely no grades for academic work. And this sounded great to me, at first. I had to work hard for good grades in college. Good grades meant much to me. So, it was really liberating to begin a class and to participate without worrying about the grades.

And yet, eventually not ever receiving any grades, just getting a few vague comments from a professor on a paper, became very frustrating. I wondered how I was doing, how I was doing in comparison with the other students, and most important of all, how I was doing in the eyes of the professor.

I remember that afternoon when I told my professor that I really needed to know how I was performing in his class.

"You are doing very well," he said.

"How well?" I asked.

"Well, very well," he said.

"How am I doing in comparison with the other students that you have taught through the years?" I asked.

"Very well," he said.

This was really frustrating. After three years of this open-ended, permissive, everybody-gets-a-pat-on-the-head approach, I was desperate to receive just one letter grade that would tell me in a definite, particular way, how I was doing. It wasn't so much that I was craving to receive judgment and grades from my professors, rather I was wanting to judge myself and I needed the professors' judgments of me to answer my simple but very important question, "How am I doing?"

Are we prepared?

The passage from Matthew I read is an interesting one to me because first of all it seems harsh for people to be treated that way at a joyous event such as a wedding. How many people today would be excluded from a wedding reception if they arrived a few minutes after the stated hour? Many people today pay little attention to the clock when it comes to arriving at events. They just show up when they show up. Some have learned that lesson the hard way when they did it too many times at work they were invited to look elsewhere for employment. Maybe that comment is sour grapes on my part because I always had to arrive on time for a worship service because I led it. I could never be late even though there have been times when I would have liked to be. That may be a partial reason I go to the other extreme and believe if I am not there at least ten minutes before the meeting, church service, a concert, etc. I am late.

A particularly frustrating thing for me is when I go to the shows at the Fox Theatre in St. Louis and when it is time for the show to begin I am having to set in my seat waiting for people to decide the show is what they came for and not the party in the lobby. Then don't get me started on those who decide at the

last minute to get their drinks to take to their seats and the ushers have to seat them with a flashlight after the show has already started.

Now, don't get me wrong, I am not suggesting that there are not many appropriate reasons for not being on time. I am just giving you too much information about how I would make a good case study for a psychologist who would like a challenge.

But I would like to go back and share a little about the gospel of Matthew after we are near the end of it that helps us a little in making sense of this passage.

It has been believed, by many, to have been written by the apostle Matthew. The gospel was written for people familiar with the Old Testament, both the Law of Moses and the prophets. His emphasis was on the Jewish community and he wanted them to know the story of Jesus but also to let them know that they should not throw away their Jewish scriptures. Matthew makes more references to the Old Testament than any other gospel and takes great care to show how Jesus fulfills the prophecies made about him earlier in the Old Testament—especially focusing on Jesus' role as the Messiah. (The promised king descended from David.)

Although Mark is considered to be the first gospel written and Matthew and Luke had access to Mark in their writing; those who put the order of the New Testament together decided Matthew was the gospel that helped bridge the Old and New Testaments.

Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of the Jewish people to help them to understand that Jesus is their long awaited Messiah, and as he puts it in his first verse of chapter one, *"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."* He emphasizes that role when he tells about his birth and writes, *"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah."* Then he has the story of the warning for Joseph not to return home the normal way but to go back through Egypt. This too has hints of the Old Testament story of Joseph and the trip to Egypt and the eventual enslavement and escape.

And, in the famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them"* (Mt 5:17).

Matthew in our passage today wants his people to know that God who has led his people throughout the ages often through exile and back again will bring about the fulfillment of the Kingdom of the Messiah and things will be set right. In other words, there will be judgment and accountability.

Toward the end of his gospel before the crucifixion of the Messiah Matthew shares teachings about the coming of the Son of Man. In chapter 24 in verses 29-31 he writes: ²⁹ *"Immediately after the suffering of those days*

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from heaven,
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.*

³⁰ *"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."*

After hearing that what do we do? Too many people start reading the tea leaves and making note of everything that might seem to us to be a current sign that the end is near. Particularly now with what is going on in the Middle East.

We don't pay much attention to the words in verse 36. ³⁶ *"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking,*

marrying, and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Then we have our scripture for today. What do we do with it? How long has it been since you have heard the idea of the second coming talked about in a Sunday School class or a sermon? There seems to be two groups. Those who don't speak of it hardly at all and those who obsess with it and wake up in the morning surprised that the end has not already come. We don't talk much about judgment. Certainly, we do not speak about judgment as much as Matthew. Matthew is notable for many narratives of final reckonings, the gavel of the judge coming down and the final verdict being rendered upon people by God.

We therefore shouldn't be surprised that this week's Gospel is a parable from Jesus that's found only in Matthew's Gospel, the parable of the ten maidens. By beginning the parable with, "*At that time,*" we know that Jesus is speaking in verse 1 of the future. The future will be like this, although we don't know the day or the hour.

A group of young women find themselves caught off guard and unprepared for the crisis that comes when the party begins. "*Therefore, keep alert, (be prepared) because you don't know the day or the hour."*

"Be prepared." That was the watchword, the slogan that you had to memorize when you became a Tenderfoot Scout. The good scout is ready to respond to emergencies. Other people, untrained people who aren't fortunate enough to have earned a First Aid Merit badge, might not know what to do in case of a serious accident, electrocution, earthquake, heat stroke—but I, being prepared, was ready. *Be prepared!*

And when some emergency or event arises, it's always a test. Are we as ready for this eventuality as we thought? Did we foresee this coming and have our past preparations enabled us to meet this test with confidence? Are we ready for our finals?

Jesus tells a parable about a group of people who were prepared and those who were not. The host's arrival for the party becomes a time of judgment. Are you prepared to enter the festivities or not? Judgment.

The maidens had good intentions of buying oil for the lamps in order to be ready for the beginning of the party. But first there was one thing and then another and, by the time the party began, they were out and about in the town seeking oil for their lamps and they missed the party. Now they must pay the price for their indecision and procrastination. Judgment.

When harvest time comes, there is time for judgment of the fruit tree. If there is fruit on the tree, we call that a good, productive tree. If there is no fruit, we call the tree unproductive. Judgment.

You won't know if you built your house well until there is a soaking storm. Then you will know whether or not you have a good foundation. Then the test, then the hour of judgment.

But think about it, when Jesus speaks to us of judgment, perhaps he is paying us quite a high compliment. In speaking of the consequences of our actions, Jesus is saying that our actions have important, even eternal, consequences. What we do, how we live, makes a difference.

God has created us as creatures who are given ability to impact the world. It's so easy to think to yourself and to say, "*I'm just one person. What difference can I make?*" Jesus tells us that we are important and that how we live our lives is of consequence.

By implication, it seems to me that when Jesus urges us to be prepared to be judged he is saying that he really does want us to do well as his disciples. In giving us a warning, he implies that he doesn't

want us to be caught off guard. Much of the good work that parents do for their children is like giving them warnings that *"If you do this, it could result in that."* What is this other than a parent trying to prepare a child for the realities of life?

The maidens are surprised by the arrival of the bridegroom, the evening's honoree. They should have been more prudent and prepared for his arrival. But there was one thing and then another. By the time they got themselves together, the door was shut, the party had begun.

I think Jesus's parable implies that you can be prepared. You can be ready, engage in practices that make you open and receptive for the event of God's revelation to you.

There was the student who said, *"I always try to show up before class expecting to be surprised. Most of the time, I am not disappointed. It really helps me to get more out of a professor's lecture if I expect I'll get something out of it."*

That student was prepared to be surprised. In the light of Jesus's parable of the wise and foolish young women, I guess that implies that there are some who are prepared for God to be surprising and those who don't and then God comes to them, God's arrival in their lives is a judgment upon them.

Maria prayed each morning before she went to work in the grocery store: *"Lord, use me in your service today. As I go about my day, make me ready to respond to others in the same loving way that you respond to me."* That's what

That morning Maria went about her duties, stacking shelves, opening boxes, sorting vegetables in the produce section of the store. The day was predictable, as usual, uneventful.

And then, when she was putting cans of tomatoes on the shelf, she saw a woman down the aisle who seemed to be crying. Just standing there, staring vacantly at the shelves.

Maria moved toward her and asked, *"Can I help?"*

At first the woman was hesitant but then she opened up to Maria. Her husband had just left her and her child. She had come to the store to buy a few groceries but was overwhelmed by all her difficulties.

Maria put her arm around her and asked, *"Can I pray for you?"*

Maria was able to be so responsive, so able to work for this woman's good, because Maria was prepared. She began her day in prayer, in expectation that there was a good chance that Christ might use her for good.

And maybe that's a major reason why you are here in church this day. You are getting oil for your lamps, so to speak. You are fashioning your life in such a way that you are preparing to have God come to you even when you don't expect God. You are listening to Jesus, applying his stories to your life. You are using today as an opportunity to prepare yourself for this day as well as your last day.

Be prepared. And you are!