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Title: One Job

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Scripture: [Matthew 5:13-16](#), [John 8:12](#), [Zechariah 4:6](#), [Luke 4:18](#)

Text: [Matthew 25:1-13](#)

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At the end of the gospel of Matthew, days before his death and resurrection, Jesus tells stories. We've looked at three already and we are going to look at three more. They weren't told back to back to back. Matthew says Jesus took a break from the first three to challenge his detractors and weep over Jerusalem. But he starts up again with

another story about a wedding which doesn't go as planned

Weddings never go as planned. I know. I've officiated at something close to 500 weddings and they simply don't. I've never had a wedding disaster unless you count the one where the bride didn't show up. I don't count it because she bailed the day before the wedding.

Things happen. The weather doesn't cooperate, the hem of a dress needs pinning, a candle blows out, or someone trips and falls. No one has fallen at any of the weddings that I've officiated. If America's Funniest Videos is to be believed, which starts its 30th season tonight, people fall a lot at weddings. People trip down the aisle, fall on stairs and slip on dance floors. I've never had this disaster.

The closest to a disaster was on a beach. The father of the bride disappeared and the wedding was delayed by a couple of hours. He was a prominent LA cardiologist and was called to the hospital for a celebrity emergency. While he was gone, it started raining and the ceremony moved inside. Between the two events, the wedding began two hours late. Weddings don't go as planned and sometimes, they don't get started on time. Everyone knows this; even Jesus. He told a story about this very thing. To understand the story, you have to understand the way first-century weddings worked.

A Jewish wedding consisted of three stages. The first was the engagement. Marriages were most often arranged between the fathers of the groom and the bride, sometimes at a very young age.

The second stage was the betrothal. We know about this stage because it plays a big part in the birth of Jesus. Vows were exchanged before family and friends under a special canopy called a "huppah." After the betrothal ceremony, the marriage was considered official even though it was yet to be physically consummated. The typical betrothal lasted a year. It was time for the groom to build a home.

All of that is a background to the story that Jesus tells when something goes wrong. It is found in the third and final stage of marriage. The wedding is called the Nissuin which means in Hebrew "to carry." The groom shows up at the house of the bride, usually in the early evening, and carries the bride back to his home. I once did a wedding where the groom, after kissing his bride, threw her over his shoulders and carried her out of the service. This is just the opposite. The groom carries his bride to the service.

Before the carry, one of the groomsmen went through the streets shouting, "Behold the groom comes" followed by the sounding of the ram's horn or shofar. This would get the bride and her bridesmaids ready. They had one job. It wasn't to carry flowers and look pretty in a special dress. Their job was to carry oil lamps to light the parade through night streets, guiding the way for the groom as he carried his bride back to the house. Remember this is the first century. There aren't street lights or lamp posts. This one job was important. The bridesmaids guide the way back to the groom's house. When they get there, the "huppah" would be set up again and final vows exchanged. At which point a seven-day wedding feast begins.¹

This is the way everything was supposed to play out. But something went wrong—two things actually. The first thing that goes wrong is the bridegroom was delayed. We don't know why. We don't know if there was a rainstorm and it put them behind schedule. We don't know if a father was called to the hospital. All we know is what Jesus says. "As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept." (Matthew 25:5) The wedding didn't get started on time.

The second thing that goes wrong was a crisis. Five of the bridesmaids didn't do their job. Remember. They had one job. They were to light the way to the wedding. For some reason, "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps." (Matthew 25:2-3) Now if your job, your sole responsibility is to light the way with your oil lamp, why wouldn't you bring oil? Why bring a lamp with just a little oil? Why show up for Trick-or-Treat without batteries for the flashlight? Why have a candlelight vigil without something to light the candles? You get the point, don't you? Jesus didn't have to say anything more and everyone listening to the story

would know, this wedding isn't going as planned. Five bridesmaids who had one job to do weren't ready.

But Jesus continues the story. "The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'" (Matthew 25:8-9)

You can't blame them. They all had one job to do and the wise five were ready. But if they gave away some of their oil, they might only be able to do half a job and then the groom would end up carrying the bride in the dark. That's a recipe for a fall. So they said no and the foolish five go off to buy some more oil. The groom finally shows up at midnight and instead of there being 10 bridesmaids, there are only five to light the way. Somehow, they make do. They make it back to the house and the wedding begins.

Jesus says the foolish five finally show up at the door of the party. We don't know how much later. We know it is later than midnight because that's when the wedding got started. I don't know about you. If someone knocks on my door after midnight, I'm grumpy. On our wedding night, the limo company called our hotel room after midnight to apologize for the limo showing up late to our wedding. I didn't appreciate the phone call. Are you surprised by that? Of course not. And I don't think you should be too surprised by the response of the groom when the foolish five beg to get in. "Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'" (Matthew 25:11b-12)

Given your experience at weddings, do you think this is reasonable? I can tell you, again because I've done a wedding or two, grooms and brides expect everyone to do their job. Let's say five bridesmaids in a wedding today don't show up in their pretty dresses to carry their flowers down the aisle and stand in support of their friend as she gets married. Let's say they blow off their one job, the one thing they are supposed to do, for whatever reason. And then, they show up at the party as if nothing happened? How many brides are going to be happy about this? How many of them might be so mad that they might say, "We're done! I don't even know you." Jesus ends the story this way. "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (Matthew 25:13)

I'll tell you what a lot of people do with the story. They make it a story about the end. In the end, are you ready? When I was in college, well-meaning student evangelists would go around the dorm asking the midnight oil question. If Jesus comes for you tonight, will you be ready? If you die tonight, are you ready?

I suppose you can make a strong case for this interpretation given the fact that the early church did think that Jesus was doing a quick round trip when he ascended from earth into heaven. The feeling that Jesus was just a day or two away from coming back was so strong and powerful in their minds, that they couldn't read anything, hear anything, and interpret anything without this on their minds. Well after Jesus told this story, they said "This is about heaven and the end. Some foolish people are going to be shut-out." They made it about the midnight oil question. Maybe they are right.

But maybe Jesus had something else in mind. After all, it was a story told before he was nailed to a cross, before he rose from the grave and before he ascended into heaven. Just maybe it was a story about living and not about dying. What might it mean if that's the kind of story he was talking about? I have an idea.

Maybe it is about light. Jesus liked using light as a metaphor for living. Remember what he said about himself? "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) Remember what he said to us? "... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

How can you be the light of the world, how can you let your light shine if you don't have oil? Oil in the Old Testament is frequently used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Kings and priests were anointed with oil as a sign of their consecrated (and, supposedly, Spirit-filled) lives. Zechariah, the prophet, was shown a vision of a great golden lampstand with two olive trees standing beside it. The trees dripped oil into the bowls of the lampstand, and Zechariah was told: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts..." (Zechariah 4:6) What did Jesus say about oil and spirit when he began his ministry. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me..." (Luke 4:18). The only way you can let your light shine is to have some oil, to feed your spirit with God's spirit, to have a growing, active faith. ²

You know there are some things in life you can't borrow. You can't borrow someone else's oil, someone else's faith. Faith is the most intensely personal experience we will ever have in life. Others can help us discover it. They can encourage us. They can pray for us. They can bring us up in the way we should go, but in the end, we must embrace it ourselves.

We have to discover oil for our lamps so the light of Christ might shine through us. No one can do that for us. The foolish five thought that they could rely upon the resources of others to get them through. What they

discovered was that there are some things you can't borrow and the light of Christ is one. You have to have your own.

Maybe it is about light and maybe it is about joy because Jesus was all about joy. If there was one image that Jesus used over and over again about the kingdom of heaven it is joy. The kingdom of heaven is like the joy of finding a treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom is like the joy of finding a lost coin, a lost sheep, or a lost boy coming home; all are incredibly joyful. And there is nothing more joyful than a wedding banquet, an image so rich that we are told that Jesus hosts wedding banquets in heaven. John says in Revelation "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Revelation 19:9)

The foolish bridesmaids were invited but because they weren't ready, they didn't experience the joy of the party. They didn't get to eat, drink, and make merry. They didn't get to dance or push and shove to catch the bride's bouquet. With the banquet already underway behind closed doors, these foolish bridesmaids no longer serve any purpose. They missed their moment. They dropped the ball, tripped, and had a hard fall. They failed their "calling" completely. No light, no joy. Maybe, just maybe that's what Jesus wants us to take from his story. No light, no joy. It's a story about living your life right now, about being His light and experiencing joy. After all, he is the one who said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b)

When a person is about to die, they tell stories, stories about their lives, and stories to give you ways to remember them. This is what Jesus is doing. Throughout his ministry, Jesus wanted followers to bring the Good News to the hurting world, to shine the light of his love, to shatter the darkness of evil by proclaiming Jesus at the true Light of the World. When you do that, it's so wonderful, so joyful, it's like a wedding party. So he's telling a story about the meaning of his life and he's inviting us into it.

Did you figure that out? Not all of Jesus's stories are about those. Some, like this one, is about us. He wants us to select a character and say, "That's me." In this case, there is only one possible selection. If Jesus is the bridegroom, you have to be a bridesmaid. Ha! In all of the weddings I've been in, I've never been a bridesmaid. It takes some holy imagination but this is the way Jesus told it. Bridesmaids, you and me and we have one job, to shine light into the darkness of the world. Do you? "Are you shining the light of Jesus into the world? If the answer is yes, you know joy because one leads to the other. It's why Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this..." (Matthew 25:1).

¹ Jewish Wedding Customs and the Bride of Messiah, Glen Kay

² <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2016/metaphors-revealing-the-holy-spirit-part-3-oil-as-a-metaphor-for-the-holy-spirit>