

“My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter hidden things, things from of old,” is the way the 78th Psalm begins, and later, in the Gospel of Matthew, it is the way the teaching methods of Jesus have been described. Very often, the varied parables of Jesus offer a choice between two ways;

The way of life and the way of death

The good way and the evil way of living

The wise and the foolish

The way of faith and obedience and the way of unbelief and disobedience

One thinks of the choice Moses set before the people of Israel at the end of Deuteronomy, when they were in the wilderness before they entered the land, “this day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Now choose life, that you and your children may live. . .”

Or perhaps Joshua at the end after the people had entered the land and possessed it, “Now fear the Lord and serve God with all faithfulness . . . But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

In some of the parables we see surprising examples of faithfulness, like in the Good Samaritan where it is the outsider who exhibits compassion or the Prodigal where the father forgives the wayward son and has mercy on him when he returned home; or the many parables about the magnitude of grace like the Treasure in the Field or the Mustard Seed or the Leaven.

In each case, one is challenged by some aspect of the spiritual life to pay attention to trust, forgiveness, or love of neighbor. In our reading today, the aspect of the spiritual life that is emphasized is readiness. The story is told of a wedding which will occur when the bridegroom arrives to take his betrothed as his wife and at which time there will be a great celebration.

It is the bridesmaids that are responsible for welcoming him but they are not sure of the precise time of his arrival. They are required to be ready any time, even if it is in the middle of the night.

It turns out that the preparedness of the bridesmaids is symbolized by their attention to the detail of having sufficient oil to light their lamps in the dark. There are ten of them, five are prepared and five are not when the bridegroom arrives at midnight, the ones who have run out of oil are away purchasing it and are left out of the celebration.

The Return of Christ

Among the early Christians there was a belief that after Christ's Ascension, Christ would also return at the end of the age. Now that we are at the end of the liturgical year, only a few weeks away from Advent, the readings draw our attention to Christ's return and the meaning of readiness. What does it mean for us to have, "oil in our lamps?"

Our perspective has been impacted by the delay of the return. The early generations of believers thought that Christ's return was imminent, that is, that it would occur during their lifetime. We read in I Thessalonians, one of Paul's earliest letters, that some of them became unsettled as that 1st generation of believers began to pass away.

Paul wrote to assure them that none would be left out; "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

Ever since it has been a cottage industry to try and predict the date but there is no need. Both Jesus and Paul warned that none will be able to predict the dates

and times. Only be encouraged by the knowledge that we will all live together with God.

We are left with the meaning of readiness. After 2,000 years, the delay forces upon us the tension between expectation and delay. Often the emphasis on one is related to a lack of emphasis on the other.

The New Testament

There is much in the New Testament to aid us in our questioning. On the one hand, attention must be given to the development of character. Readiness is associated with high character. Of course, we are not able to achieve high character on our own, without God's help. But we are not without God's help.

To give one example among many of what Christian character looks like, let me read an extended passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; **23** to be made new in the attitude of your minds; **24** and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. **26** "In your anger do not sin" Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, **27** and do not give the devil a foothold. **28** Anyone

who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. **32** Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

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1 Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children **2** and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. **4** Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. **5** For of this you can be sure: No

immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.[e] **6** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. **7** Therefore do not be partners with them.

8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light **9** (for the fruit of

the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) **10** and find out what pleases the Lord.

I will stop there because it is enough. One is not expected to be perfect. There is mercy in these demands, but a life of readiness consists of a constant lifelong pursuit, putting off the old self and putting on the new.

The Other Hand

On the other hand, each of us is given a unique path to walk through life, a unique set of gifts, relationships, and tasks to perform. Part of what it means to be ready is to seek, by asking in prayer and paying thoughtful attention, the unique purpose in life. Whatever this may entail, to seek it and accept and give one's best to accomplish it, no matter at what stage of life one may be, is to put "oil in the lamp."

To be ready is to be caught in the act of living the life one has been called to live.

Prayer

O God of light and wisdom, of grace, of your love give to each of us goodness, righteousness, and truth, and direct our paths as promised into peace and health, and into your perfect will, that we may each find our truest selves, and have joy throughout our days - and be caught following your example - in the hope of resurrection and eternal life.

Amen

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