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Title: The Stories Jesus Told: The Shut Door

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

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Good morning. Let's pray together. God, as we begin this journey through some of the stories that Jesus told, I pray that you would speak to each of us and that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and in emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Before there was GPS, there was a need for maps. Now, you generally don't need it, and you don't always even need to know how things fit together. In fact, I would guess there are two kinds of people when it comes to maps and GPS. There are those who say I want to know where everything is, and those who say just plug in the address and I'll follow the right turn left turn, here, there, and next thing. And those two usually are married to each other.

I had a moment a while ago when I was with one of my sons. We've gone to Canada, and I had not gotten the international plan for my phone. And so, when we got there, and we were going far into Canada, I had to actually go back to relying on maps. And I remembered again how different it is than GPS. And here's the thing with maps, they form a picture in your mind of how things should be. So, when you anticipate something on a map and it's different than reality, if your map is wrong, it changes everything. And we have mental maps about how we see the world.

Jesus tells stories known as parables, as a way to say, here is a mental map for how you can see the world, how you can see reality. And these aren't just stories that provide some wisdom or insight. These are authoritative because they are from Jesus. Today we're starting the series that we're calling *The Stories Jesus Told*. And if you've been around for a while, this may sound familiar. If it sounds familiar, it's because we did a series called *The Stories Jesus Told* eight years ago in 2016, and we did about half of the parables. And so now we're going to do the other half. So, if you missed a parable, you could go back and hear it. But we're completing most of the parables just with an eight-year gap.

Today we're going to begin with this parable Jesus tells that's often called the "Parable of the Ten Virgins," or as I like to say, it's the parable of "The Shut Door." The way that I'd like to look at this with you today is just simply to reread it and comment on some of the important items that are in here.

Here's how this story begins. It says, at that time, the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now, I mentioned this idea of mental maps because you have a mental map, and as soon as I said the Kingdom of Heaven, or you read that in the text, you have a picture of what you think heaven is like and it informs how you read this story. In fact, I would say that that the way that this story is read has informed a lot of people's view of heaven. And it's important when we understand that there are different stories and accounts that Jesus tells to understand that they all emphasize different truth.

Murray Harris is a New Testament scholar who wrote this about understanding and interpreting the Bible. He says, "No metaphor," and we could substitute parable here, "that is

used to picture believers' relationship to Christ or God can or should be applied at every point of the comparison. Indeed, to do so would lead to a serious distortion of the truth. For instance, to deduce from the image of the potter and the clay," which is found in Romans nine, "the gods use human relationships or humans as impersonal objects, or to infer that the picture of Christ and the Church is the betrothed bride to Christ," second Corinthians 11, "that he never actually intends to become the bridegroom is to pervert the truth. Each figure that depicts the divine human relationship illustrates some aspects or aspects of the truth, but none of them illustrates every aspect. So, we may speak with justification of the complementarity of the New Testament metaphors," or parables, "that describe Christ and Christian relationships. Together, they present a balanced, accurate picture. But considered alone and pressed at every point, they give a distorted and erroneous picture."

So, Kingdom of the Heavens is the first phrase that I just want us to think about and think about your picture. What comes to mind when I say Kingdom of Heaven? In your mind, what is your picture? Well, first, this word heaven is actually plural. It's the word heavens. So, it's kingdom of the heavens. And the way people thought about the heavens in that day was to think of it in three stages.

There's the sky where the birds are, and then there's the sun, moon, stars, eclipse, you know, all of that is the first heaven. Then there's the heaven beyond the first heaven. Paul alludes to it in Second Corinthians. And all of this was considered the heavens. So when the phrase kingdom of the heavens is utilized, it's not just referring to some distant place, but it's referring to all of it.

Here's part of what the mental map would have been for the people of that day. They would have thought the kingdom of the heavens referred to the dwelling of God. And what you see is that in Matthew chapter four, that same phrase is used, Kingdom of the Heaven or Kingdom of the Heavens. Here's what it says. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Again, you might hear that and say, well, it's come near. It means that it's still in the future. But Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the New Testament, the message says the kingdom is here. And again, the way that the listeners probably would have heard this is saying the kingdom of heavens is now here and this is Jesus' prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, again in Matthew. This is important because this helps inform how we read Matthew 25, the Kingdom of the Heaven, when he says, let your kingdom come, let it be on Earth as it is in heaven. What he's saying is the kingdom is here.

And so, this, I think, leads to some false views of heaven. And by false, I don't mean false in that there's no truth in them. I mean false if they're pressed to be completely the sole way to look at and think about the Kingdom of heaven. One of them is this view. And I'm just going to say that this is a person, this is Earth, and you are traveling through your time on Earth. And somewhere out here, there's a celestial, gated country club in the future. And so, the view of heaven is, I'm here on Earth. Earth is difficult and full of hardship, but one day I can participate in heaven, in the future, and it has this gated thing, but it'll be a country club for those who want to get there, and others will be rejected. And the reason I say that this is not entirely true, but partially true, is because there is an element to the fact that the kingdom of Heaven is future.

But there's also an element in the Bible to it being now. There's an element to there being a gate, a door, it comes from this passage and others, and there being exclusion. But the emphasis is on this invitation to a party to say everyone can come. What this view does for a lot of people is it makes them think that this world is to be endured, and one day if you can manage to get in, however that gate works, then you'll have the real deal. But again, the parable here and the whole of the teaching of Matthew is that the Kingdom of Heaven has come, that it is here, and it is the prayer of Jesus to say, let your Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, be seen here and now.

Another way that some people view heaven, the kingdom of heaven, is what I call the sinking ship analogy. And what some people do is they see it as there are people who need to get off this sinking ship and escape from the sinking ship, which is our world. Now, again, to be fair, this has some element of truth to it. But when this is taken to be the only way that you see it, rather than seeing it as an invitation to a wedding, which is one of the images. Again, remember what Murray Harris said. You can take any of these images too far. But if you don't have this idea that the kingdom of heaven is this wedding celebration, this party, this feast, this beautiful thing, what will happen is you'll get into this myopic view that simply says we have to get as many people off the sinking ship as possible.

Now, again, don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that there isn't an element of saying we care about what people's eternal destiny is. This very idea that the door is shut in this parable says there is a time in which the question will be called. But if this is your predominant view of heaven, it's not very inspiring. It's just simply saying this is a way to get out of something that's not good.

Then probably another view, maybe not as common, but I would call this an empire to build view. And this is the view that says you join a movement and together you are bringing heaven to earth. You are making heaven come down because you are part of this. And I use the word empire because Scot McKnight just came out earlier this year with a translation of the New Testament called the Second Testament. I had Scot McKnight when I was in seminary, as I had Murray Harris, a couple of people quoted today.

But Scot McKnight uses the word empire for the word kingdom. So, wherever the word kingdom is in the New Testament, he uses the word empire. And what he's trying to do, I believe, is jar us in our reading so that we don't just read Kingdom and go, oh yeah, the Kingdom of God, whatever that is, but we hear it, and we say God is about something more. He's about establishing a rule, a way of doing things here on Earth. Now, I don't think empire works very well because I hear it, and I think of *The Empire Strikes Back*. But I appreciate his idea. And the reason I say that this is a little off also, and again, there's elements of truth here, but a little off, because here the kingdom of heaven is something you bring about. There is no king. There is no definitive moment because you're working to make it all happen. And so, that's another view of heaven that's here.

And as we look at this story, a lot of those views may have been prevalent then. But it's important to say the Kingdom of Heaven is something that is both now and future. It is an invitation to a party, but it is a party that you can miss. And it's something that you inhabit now, and yet it'll be in its fullness one day.

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep."

So, five came prepared, and five did not. And the wedding culture of that day was that the the announcement or the the waiting was part of it. You would start by saying, okay, we're all gathered. Now the bridegroom goes away for a couple of days sometimes, and then they'd come back whenever they were ready, and then you would go out and throw this party, be part of this party. And five weren't prepared because they didn't have enough light.

Verse six, "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'"

Now again, the door being shut, I think, is in some ways part of the point of this story. The full point is that you don't know when Jesus is coming. He's the bridegroom in this analogy. And so, in some ways the point is clear. I don't think there's a lot of significance to the fact that they're named virgins. I think the idea is that they are attendants, and again, you see the merging of different metaphors. In some metaphors the church is the bride of Christ. Here they're the wedding attendants. But he tells us the point. He says, you don't know the day and the hour. So, know that there's a chance that you can miss something.

Have you ever missed something that you wanted to catch? We used to have some friends who had a place on an island, and we would go visit with them at times. The issue for the island was to get there, you had to take a ferry. It was one of those things where if you missed the ferry, you had to wait for the next ferry. And so, you would always race to try to catch the ferry. It was one of the most disappointing things when you would see that thing close and pull away just as you pulled up because you timed it poorly.

Well, there's a little bit of that in this. But his point isn't as much that as it is this idea of living ready. When our kids were little, sometimes my wife would go away. She stayed home when our kids were young with the four of them. And I would always, if she went away, visit her sister, go with a friend or something, and this is not marriage advice, by the way, I would always make it my goal that when she came home that the house would be clean, the meals would be served, the kids would be happy, and they would have tons of tales of how great their dad was. Because when my wife would come back, what she would want me to say is how do you do it? It's so hard. And what I did instead was say you have a great life. Like I said, not marriage advice. Just how it rolled for us.

But in order to pull that off, what I had to do, and this is before you could track and know exactly where somebody was, I had to live in anticipation. And as soon as my kids got something out of whack, when I knew she was coming home that day, I was like put that

away. This place is going to be spotless and everything's going to be just right. There was anticipation in not knowing when she was coming. And I think that's part of Jesus' point. Notice that the attendants looked and seemed the same, but some were ready, and some were not. And this leads us to this kind of ending point of this parable. It says later, verse 11, "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'" And notice what he says. "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'"

Now, if you know the Book of Matthew, Sermon on the Mount, are you familiar with another place where Jesus says this? Matthew seven, he says something very similar. This is Matthew seven, verses 21 through 23. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

So, do you see how in Matthew 25 Jesus uses the same language? I never knew you. And I think Matthew seven and Matthew 25 are actually some of the scariest verses in the Bible because here's what they're saying. They're saying it's possible to think that you are right and that you're part of the kingdom of heaven, and you're not part of the kingdom of heaven. And that you haven't lived with readiness.

He even gives us a little hint here in Matthew chapter seven about the ways we might think that we're part of the kingdom of heaven. Because what he says is, you'll come to me and say Lord, Lord, and in the original language, to repeat a word was a way of bolding it, emphasizing it. It's like saying there's passion, there's energy.

So, this is the person in our modern parlance who might say, you know, I worship when I come to church, I raise my hands, I sing boldly, I'm passionate. The word Lord was a confessional word. And so, there's doctrinal clarity. So, this is the person in our modern era who says I have believed the right things. I study doctrine, and I get my doctrine right, and because of that, I'm pretty certain that I know how it all works. Then there's the person who's active in ministry, casting out demons, doing the miraculous. He says there will be people who will come on that day who will say, Lord, Lord, emotional engagement, doctrinal correctness, ministry activity, and he'll say, I never knew you.

Then he tells us who he does know, the one who has a relationship with you, I never knew you, meaning there's some who are known, and then he says, but the one who does what I say in obedience. And so, his point is to say, are you one who is known. Now ultimately, obedience and knowledge come from not so much saying I'm going to obey as much as saying I know that Jesus has paid for me, and why would I do anything other than surrender my life to a God who's been so gracious and so good to me?

Then Jesus adds this one phrase in Matthew 25 verse 13. It says this. "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." Now, what is Jesus' point when he says keep watch? This seems to me, to be his point saying, you don't know when Jesus is coming back. He's coming back. And some have interpreted this to mean you should watch for the signs, that you should be all about what's going on.

And because of the proximity of this story to Matthew 24, where it appears to be a passage about the future, they'll say, well, therefore, what I need to do is be hyper aware of what's going on. And if that's helpful to you, I think that's fine and helpful, but I don't think that's actually Jesus' point here. The reason I don't think it's his point is because the way that you understand what a word means ultimately is you look and say, how is this word used throughout the rest of the New Testament?

The word is "gregoreo" in the original language. It's used 22 times in the New Testament. It's certainly used here. It's used in Matthew 24 when he says keep watch. And it was a technical word that meant stay awake, be alert, be on guard. It's used in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was saying to his disciples, would you keep watch? Would you stay awake with me? If you remember, they fell asleep in that account. So those are some places where it's used.

But let me give you a few of the other places that it's used. It's used in First Corinthians chapter 16, verse 13. Here's what it says. "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong." It's used as this general exhortation to say, be on guard, be vigilant, live with a sense of anticipation. It's used in Colossians chapter 4 verse 2. "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." So, the word be watchful here. He's using it as a word in the New Testament for be watchful, be on guard, be vigilant, be always alert. He's saying this is how this is used, and then he uses it with prayer.

Dallas Willard says this about prayer. He said, "Don't seek to develop a prayer life. Seek a praying life. A prayer life is a segment in time for prayer. You'll end up feeling guilty that you didn't spend more time in prayer, and eventually you'll probably feel defeated and give up. But a praying life is a life that's saturated with prayerfulness. You seek to do all that you do with the Lord."

And what Colossians 4:2 is saying is be devoted to prayer, keep watchful, keep awake. In other words, make this the journey of your life. This word is used also in First Peter, chapter 5, verse 8. Here it's used about being alert again in terms of Satan's tactics. "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." So, he says be alert, be awake, be vigilant, because there's a spiritual being who's bent on your destruction. He wants to destroy your marriage, your family, wants to get you addicted to something, wants to get you ensnared with some kind of a sin, wants you to become materialistic, indifferent, and wants to destroy your health. He says, be alert, be aware. There's a spiritual battle going on.

Then it's used in Revelation chapter 3, verse 2. It says this. "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." And then in Revelation 16, also verse 15, we see it this way. "Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed."

So, what does all of that mean? Why do I show you those verses and say, this is part of understanding this? Here's what I think is going on. When Jesus says be awake because you

don't know the time or the hour, he's saying be on guard from external threats because there are things that are going to want to take you away from faith and a journey of faith and from the Kingdom of God and from internal indifference.

The prayerfulness, the stay awake, in the church in Sardis in Revelation 3 it says, I know that you have a reputation for being alive, but you're asleep, you're dead. Wake up. And so, there's indifference, there's external threats. And, while it may seem remote to some of us to orient our lives around the Kingdom of Heaven, the alternative is really simple, and that is we orient our lives around the kingdom of us, and if we orient our life around the kingdom of us, we're not watching. We're not being vigilant. We're not living ready, so to speak.

Then there's a question to ask yourself, and that is, am I among the wise or the foolish? Now, you should be asking at least one question if you haven't, and that is, isn't salvation by faith alone, by grace alone, isn't it by what Jesus did and not by what I do? Here it seems that the person must watch, or they miss out, the door gets shut on them. And that's the right question to ask.

Here's what I think sometimes happens in church context, and that is we take our theological system and we put it over the top of any text that we read so that the text can't say what the text says. I'm not saying that we don't have theological systems, and we don't look at them in connection with how everything goes, but this text and Jesus' point is that there are people who will look like they have everything kind of together, and yet they're not living in anticipation and in the reality of the kingdom of heaven.

Here's the issue that I want to drive. If you're here, and for you, the kingdom of heaven is some future thing that you say maybe one day I'll take it seriously, then you're not ready. If for you the Kingdom of Heaven is something to escape, and you feel like, well, since I prayed a prayer one day in the past, and I was told that once I'm saved, I'm always saved. Therefore, I don't need to have any sense of anticipation or living with readiness. Then you are not ready. If you are somebody who is saying I'm working to bring the kingdom, but you're not anticipating a future kingdom, then you could also miss what's being talked about here. Because what living ready means is that you live with nothing undone, nothing that's not surrendered to the king. That's why we come and say the kingdom of heaven is what we're about.

Now, I love the fact that even in this text, it's being ready. It's not about perfection. Even the attendants who made it to the feast fell asleep. But it's about an orientation of life. And there is a sense in which if you have an orientation that says, I am about the kingdom of heaven, then you can say with confidence that you will one day be able to say, God knows me, the Lord knows me, and it isn't because you did it. It's because of what Jesus did, and it's verified with your living ready.

And so, the call today is simple and that is, are you living with a sense of vigilance about your relationship with God and your engagement in the kingdom of Heaven? And if so, then you can say, I know that I've been invited to this party that will one day be in full and is today in part, and today, there's beauty in it. And one day it will be incredible. And if the door question to you is, where am I? I would just plead with you and say that is Jesus' point. Know

that at any time it can become the question that's called in your life. And so, make today the day that you say I'll trust Jesus, and I will live ready.

God, we ask today that you would help each of us to not let our mental maps of how we think things are, keep us from reading the pages of Scripture to get your mental maps. Help us to take what we learn and live in its reality so we can live with freedom and anticipation and vigilance all the days of our lives. We pray this in the good name of Jesus Christ. Amen.