

"DO-IT-YOURSELF RELIGION"
September 17, 1989

TEXT: Matthew 25:9 "But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.'"

In some ways this morning's parable has to be one of the most confusing passages in the whole New Testament. Most people take a look at it and wonder, "What in the world is this all about? Who ever heard of a wedding like that? Why did they not know when the bridegroom would arrive? And what was all that talk about lamps? And why were the foolish maidens kept outside? But most of all, they wonder why did Jesus seem to condone such selfishness on the part of those he called "wise." Yet, it is really not so strange. Jesus simply took a common situation and used it to teach an important lesson.

As odd as that story may sound to us, it must have had a very familiar ring to Jesus' listeners. If you or I were to get a wedding invitation with no date on it, we would think it a monumental goof. But that was the way things worked in Jesus' day. Once the wedding was announced, the groom and his party could come at any time during the next several weeks. Quite literally, "No one knoweth when the bridegroom cometh." Young women, like our present-day bride's maids would keep the bride company until the groom appeared. But they had to stay alert, for it was considered quite a coup if the groom could catch the bridal party unprepared. It was a kind of a game they played.

Still, games have rules, and so did this one. First of all, the groom had to send a crier out ahead of him to shout in a loud voice, "Behold the bridegroom," Secondly, no one was allowed on the street at night without a lighted lamp. And, thirdly, once the groom arrived, the door was shut and latecomers would miss both the ceremony, itself, and the week-long celebration which followed. Perhaps that was their way of keeping down the cost of the reception, I am not sure. But you can see, it was just as Jesus described it.

And his lesson was two-fold. First and foremost, that no one knows when the Kingdom of Heaven will come. Nor do we know when we will need the courage, comfort, and strength which only a strong and mature faith can give us. The only way to be safe is to be prepared at all times. But there is also a second

thought which I would like to stress this morning. You will recall that the foolish girls, the ones without enough oil, said to the wise ones, "Give us some of your oil." But the wise maidens answered, "There might not be enough to go around if we do that. Go get your own oil." We might regret their lack of generosity, but that is not the point. Jesus was reminding us that there are some things in life which simply can not be borrowed.

Some of you may recall that famous TV commercial from some years back which showed a young woman trying to fix dinner in spite of a bad headache. When her mother tried to help her, the daughter snapped back, "Please, Mother, I'd rather do it myself." In this parable Jesus is reminding us that --rather or not-- there are some things we simply must do for ourselves.

For instance, we can not borrow a Bible. Oh, yes, we can borrow the book, itself, but what good does that do. It is of use to us only if we have already made its acquaintance. Some of you may have heard the story about the man who was in serious trouble and turned to the Bible for advice. Not knowing much about the book, he just closed his eyes, opened its pages at random, and put his finger down on a passage. That is what we call "The Inspired Finger Approach to Biblical Interpretation."

The first passage he found was Matthew 27, verse 5, which says, "And Judas went and hanged himself." Well, that was hardly the kind of advice he wanted so he tried again. This time he found Luke 10:37. It reads, "And Jesus said unto him, 'Go and do likewise.'" Well, that did not help either, so he thumbed through the book once more and came upon John 13:27: "Whatever you are going to do, do quickly." And finally, in desperation, he gave it one more try and turned to Luke 6:46, which reads, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"

Now, of course, that is only a story, but it illustrates my point. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, the Bible is not really a book at all. It is a whole library. Some parts are marvelously beautiful, but others are just plain boring. Some are magnificently spiritual, others totally secular. Some parts are deeply devotional, but some are very dry and legalistic. To use the Bible with any real effectiveness we have to know which are which. And that means frequent hours spent with its contents.

In the same way, we really can not borrow a prayer. Once again, of course, we can borrow the words --or whole books of words. But they will not help us much either unless we have already learned to pray. Martin Luther used to pray, "Grant that I may not pray alone with my mouth; help me to pray from the depths of my heart." That is the only kind of prayer that really means anything.

Without faith, prayer seems downright silly. Like talking to a stranger we have always ignored, whose very existence may seem doubtful. What does one say? How does one ask? Is it all right to ask at all? Unless we have already developed some kind of meaningful prayer life, how can we pray when we need to? Like so many other things, prayer just can not be borrowed. It has to be a part of us.

Nor can we borrow a church. People sometimes think they can --for weddings, meetings, and dinners. But they are not borrowing the church. They are just borrowing the building, what our Congregational ancestors used to call the Meeting House. The real Church includes such things as loving associations and associatates, hallowed memories (both personal and communal), and the investment of time, treasure, and self. It means a sense of belonging, of giving to and not just taking from. These are what make the difference between a building and a church, between a church and our church.

Something that can not be borrowed is a minister. Oh, we sometimes perform services for non-members: weddings, funerals, and the like. And, when we do, we hope to be helpful. But unchurched people can hardly share the depth of feeling experienced by those with whom we have a real relationship. At best, we must seem like little more than nice, well-meaning people, saying nice, well-meant words.

One of the most moving experiences of my ministry involved the husband of a former parishioner. He was not a member of any church, and sometimes teased his wife because she was. But whenever I called I always included him in the conversation. And when he became sick I visited him in the hospital. Then, the day before he died, he introduced me to a friend by saying, "This is our minister." And, looking me right in the eyes, he added, "He used to be my wife's minister, but now he's our minister." He had learned --just in time as it turned out-- that you can not borrow a minister.

And, of course, what all this really means is that we can not borrow a faith. The faith which gives meaning to all those other things: Bible, prayer, church, and clergy. And which, in turn, is built up by them. We develop physical strength through bodily exercise. Constant, intentional, and increasingly strenuous exercise. Well, we gain spiritual strength in a similar way, by spiritual exercise. And it must be just as constant, just as intentional, and, in its own way, just as strenuous. It takes constant fellowship with the Bible, with prayer, with the church, and with other Christians to build the kind of faith that will really help us when we need it.

Some things just can not be borrowed. They have to be developed. Jesus said, "No one knows when the bridegroom cometh." No one knows when faith may be needed, perhaps needed desperately. But one thing is clear. The time to develop our faith is now --before it is too late.