Pastor Paul Ferguson's sermon on 11-08-26 based on Matthew 25:1-15

"Later"

My kids would tell you that growing up in our house, there was one word they learned to use at a very early age. It wasn't "please." It wasn't "thank you." And I'm sure it wasn't "Yes, Dad, I'd be delighted to help." No. It was one word.

LATER.

"Hey, would you go clean your bathroom?" "Sure, Dad. Later."
"Would you unload the dishwasher?" "Yep. Later."
"Have you picked up your room?" "I'm going to. Later."
Now, I have four children. And somewhere along the way, I became convinced that "later" was an actual time on their calendars or clocks. I just couldn't figure out when it was.

Apparently, "later" came sometime after watching television, texting friends, playing video games, taking a nap, and possibly the second coming of Christ. And here's what always amazed me. They weren't necessarily saying no. They were saying yes. Just not right now.

And there's a big difference between those two things. Because when you say "no," at least everybody knows where you stand. But "later"? "Later" sounds cooperative. "Later" sounds responsible. "Later" sounds like you have every intention of getting the job done. It just doesn't require you to do anything right now. And I discovered something else about "later." Later has a remarkable ability to turn into never. The dishes were still in the sink. The bathroom was still a science experiment. And somehow, the same child who couldn't find five minutes to clean a toilet could find three hours to stare at a phone.

Now, before we get too hard on my children, I need to confess something. I have a pretty good relationship with that word myself. I'll make that phone call. Later. I'll have that difficult conversation. Later. I'll spend more time in God's Word. Later. I'll get serious about my prayer life. Later. I'll forgive that person. Later. I'll make more room for Jesus in my life.
Later. And here's the problem. We tend to treat tomorrow like it's a promise, when in reality, tomorrow is a gift we've never been guaranteed.

You know, when my kids said 'later,' I usually knew what they meant. They were hoping Dad would forget. But Jesus isn't coming back because He's forgotten about us. He's coming back precisely because He hasn't forgotten us. He made a promise. And He keeps His promises." And that brings us to a rather uncomfortable story Jesus tells in Matthew chapter 25 in which later finally comes. And the door is shut. Ten young women are waiting for a wedding. They have their lamps. They expect the bridegroom. They all intend to join the celebration. Nobody plans to be left outside. But five are. And Jesus tells this story because he loves us too much to let us confuse good intentions with readiness.

The Bridegroom is coming. What are we doing with the waiting? Jesus tells this parable during Holy Week. In a few days, his disciples will see him arrested. They will watch their hopes collapse. His body will be placed in a tomb. But he will rise. He will ascend to his Father. And he will return.
The One telling this story knows exactly what his promises will cost him. He also knows that his people will have to wait. And waiting can wear a person down. At first, you check the phone every few minutes. Then every hour. Eventually, you stop expecting the call. That happens with deeper things, too. You pray for your child. You pray for your marriage. You pray for relief from a sorrow that follows you from room to room. After a while, hope begins to feel exhausting.

The Church knows that weariness. Generation after generation, Christians have confessed that Jesus will come again. And still the cemetery grows. Still the wars continue. Still another Sunday comes, and Jesus has not appeared. The danger is that his return gradually slips out of our expectations. We still say the words. But we organize our lives around everything else. The calendar is real. The mortgage is real. The diagnosis is real. The coming of Jesus becomes something we mention in church. Something to think about later.

In the parable, the bridegroom is delayed. The women grow drowsy. They fall asleep. All ten of them. That matters. Jesus does not divide these women into the exhausted and the energetic. Some of you are barely holding things together. You are caring for someone who needs you constantly. You are working hard and still falling behind. You are grieving. This parable does not condemn you for being tired. The wise women sleep, too. The difference is that five bring oil with their lamps. Five do not. Outwardly, they belong to the same wedding party. But when the midnight announcement comes, the difference becomes clear. Five are ready. Five discover that a lamp without oil cannot give them the light they need.
They ask the others to share. There will not be enough. They leave to buy more. While they are gone, the bridegroom arrives. The ready women enter the feast. The door closes. When the others return, they plead to be admitted. The bridegroom answers, "I do not know you."

We want that ending softened. Surely there is another chance. Surely someone can open a window. Surely good intentions count for something. But Jesus leaves the door closed.
His warning is real. There will be a last day. There will be a judgment. The opportunity to hear his Gospel and receive his mercy will not remain before us forever. And being familiar with Christian things is not the same as trusting Christ. You can inherit your grandmother's Bible. You cannot inherit her faith like the furniture in her living room. You can know every verse of your favorite hymn and still refuse the forgiveness it announces. You can belong to a congregation while treating its Lord as a stranger. That warning reaches into this pulpit, too. None of us is rescued by our position, our family history, or our ability to look religious.
We need Jesus.

And Jesus addresses us today. Where have you been saying "later"? Perhaps there is a sin you keep defending because repentance would require an uncomfortable change. Perhaps you have made peace with bitterness. Perhaps hearing God's Word has become something you fit around everything else. You haven't announced that you are leaving Jesus. You have simply stopped making room to hear him. The devil is quite content with that arrangement. He can do a great deal with "later." So hear the Lord's call. Repent. Bring him the sin you have been excusing. Bring him the heart you cannot repair. Hear him while he is speaking mercy to you. Now, a frightened conscience may already be asking: Am I ready? Do I have enough faith? Have I prayed enough, served enough, believed strongly enough? We can turn even this parable into another exhausting attempt to save ourselves. But look at the One telling it. He is on his way to the cross. Jesus knows the judgment our sins deserve. He has come to bear it. Every postponed repentance. Every cruel word. Every time we have used another person for our convenience. Every day we have lived as though God had no claim upon us.

Jesus takes it all. At the cross, the innocent Son stands in the place of the guilty. He suffers the condemnation we have earned. He dies our death. Then he rises. The tomb is empty. Your sin has been answered for. Death has met its conqueror. This is the Bridegroom who is coming. The same Jesus who gave himself for you. Your welcome at his feast rests upon his finished work. Faith receives that gift. And faith itself is the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings us to Christ through the Gospel.

Jesus does not explain every detail of the oil. We need not turn the parable into a secret code. Its warning is clear: outward belonging cannot replace faith, and readiness cannot be borrowed when the Bridegroom arrives. But the answer to that warning is found in the Savior who speaks it. He gives what he commands us to receive. He sustains the people he calls to wait. In Baptism, he has placed his name upon

you. In absolution, he speaks forgiveness for actual sins—your sins. Through his Word, he gives promises that stand when your feelings collapse. At his altar, he gives you his true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The coming Bridegroom cares for his people now. You come here with empty hands. He fills them with his gifts.

Picture yourself beside someone you love in a hospital room. It is late. The hallway is quiet. You have been sitting in the same chair long enough to know every uncomfortable place in it. Earlier, you asked questions. You discussed treatments. You tried to be encouraging. Now you have run out of things to say. The person in the bed whispers, "Would you read something?" You reach for a Bible and find the Twenty-third Psalm. Your voice catches. You wish you could offer a guarantee about the test results. You wish you could promise that tomorrow will be better. Instead, you read about the Shepherd who stays with his sheep through the valley of death. The room remains a hospital room. But the promise of Jesus is there. You sit quietly together. Perhaps you have lived that scene. Perhaps you are living it now. That is Christian waiting: helpless people receiving a promise stronger than everything threatening them.

A trembling hand can receive a precious gift. A trembling faith receives the whole Christ. Your Savior does not become less faithful when you become afraid. So let his people read his promises to you when you cannot find the words. Keep hearing the voice of your Shepherd. He knows how long the night feels. And he knows how to keep you through it. He also gives us people to love while we wait. The return of Jesus gives urgency and hope to ordinary life. The neighbor across the street is someone for whom Christ died. The coworker who irritates you is someone who needs mercy. The child asking another question is someone entrusted to your care. These people are already in your life. You don't have to wait for a different season to begin loving them. Sometimes we imagine mission as something that happens somewhere else, carried out by people with more courage and better answers. Meanwhile, someone near us is wondering whether anybody would notice if they stopped showing up. Someone is ashamed. Someone is afraid of dying. Someone assumes God could never want them. And you know the Savior who receives sinners. You can speak his name.

Imagine pulling into your driveway after a long day. There are groceries in the back seat. Something frozen is getting soft. You are already thinking about dinner. Your neighbor calls hello. You exchange the usual words. Then you ask, "How are you doing?" Expecting, "Fine." But this time, there is a pause. "Actually, it's been a rough week." You could keep walking. Nobody would blame you. Instead, you set down the bags. You listen. There is trouble in the marriage. Or a parent is declining. Or the fear that seemed manageable last month has become too heavy. You don't have an answer for everything. You say, "I'm glad you told me." Then perhaps, "Could I pray for you?" A few days later, you invite that neighbor to supper. Eventually, you say, "When I'm afraid, I need the promises of Jesus. Come sit with me Sunday." An ordinary driveway. An interrupted evening. A neighbor loved. That is everyday mission life.

People who have received mercy making room for someone else to hear it. And sometimes we miss the moment. We keep walking. We forget to call. We decide someone else will help. Then we confess that, too. Jesus forgives us. His mercy sends us back into the lives of our neighbors. Our service does not purchase a seat at the wedding. The Bridegroom has secured our welcome. His generosity frees us to spend our time and attention on someone besides ourselves. We have something to give because he keeps giving to us.

Think of one person now. Someone you have meant to call. Someone who has drifted from worship. Someone whose grief has outlasted everybody else's attention. You do not need to prepare a speech. You can begin with, "I've been thinking about you." You can listen. You can invite. You can say, "There is forgiveness in Jesus for people like us." You cannot believe for that person. You cannot create faith. The Holy Spirit does that through the Gospel. But you can speak the Gospel you have received. You can put the invitation into words. The Lord has given us today. And one day, he will bring all our waiting to its end.

The risen Christ will appear. The dead will rise. The Judge of all will stand before the world. For those who trust him, that day will reveal the full wonder of the salvation he has already won.

Imagine waking without dread. Imagine a body untouched by pain. Imagine loving someone without fearing the next goodbye. Imagine the people of God gathered around Jesus, with every grave emptied and every enemy defeated. The feast will have begun. The joy will never run out. That future belongs to you in Christ. So hear his warning. Receive his forgiveness. Let his promises sustain you. Then go home and love the people he has placed there.

Make the call.
Speak the apology.
Invite the neighbor.

Bring your weary heart back to the Word that gives it life. You do not know how long the waiting will last. You know the One who is coming. His hands still bear the marks of his love for you.

The Bridegroom is coming.
Jesus is coming.
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.
Amen