

Parable of the Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

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Last Sunday, we finished Matthew 24. This morning, as we work through Matthew 25:1-13, we are still in the Olivet Discourse, which means Jesus is still teaching His disciples on the Mount of Olives.

In Matthew 24, He called us to be ready for His return at any moment. Now, He equips us to wait. He alluded to waiting in the parable of the wise and wicked servants. In v. 48, He said the master was “*delayed*,” and that Greek word means *the master was gone a long time*.

In Matthew 24, Jesus taught us He could return anytime. However, what if He doesn’t? What if His return is much farther away than we expected? This means we need to be prepared to wait.

Every generation thought Jesus was coming back in their lifetime, but He didn’t. Every generation has thought they might be the last one, but they weren’t. So, while we must be ready for Him to return at any moment, we must also be prepared to wait in faithfulness for a long time.

To prepare His disciples to endure until the end, Jesus tells the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13. In this parable, we will see how one group started strong but did not endure to the end. We will also see another group who prepared themselves to wait and endure to the end. So, we must be ready for Jesus to return at any moment, but we must also be prepared to live a lifetime waiting for Jesus. Let’s get to work on the text.

The parable is fairly straightforward. It is not an allegory, but like many parables, it has some allegorical characteristics. The *bridegroom* represents Jesus. Then, His arrival as the bridegroom is His return to take His church home.

The *ten virgins* should be understood as *bridesmaids*. Virgins simply means they were young girls who were friends of the bride. They represent all who are waiting for Christ.

While some believe the number *ten* is significant, it is really not. It simply helps to easily divide the group into two groups of five. The *five wise bridesmaids* represent those who were prepared and waited expectantly for Christ’s return. *The other five, the foolish bridesmaids*, are those who were not prepared to wait a long time for Christ’s return.

The *oil* in the parable doesn’t represent anything significant. It is simply a part of the parable that emphasizes being ready. Some say it represents the Holy Spirit, but it doesn’t. Again, this parable is not an allegory.

The main point of the parable is v. 13. I can’t state it any better than Jesus:

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Let’s examine the setting of the parable. The setting is a Jewish wedding banquet or festival. When first-century Jews heard this parable, it would have made perfect sense to them. However, the setting is strange to our modern ears because we do not have weddings like first-century Jews. So, we need some explanation.

A first-century Jewish wedding celebration would last all day, and some lasted a week. The celebration usually began early in the morning when the groom left his house with a group of his friends. They would walk to the bride’s home to collect the bride and her bridesmaids. They would then have ceremonies and festivities at her parents’ house. After those festivities, the party would then make their way to the groom’s house. They would sing, dance, and celebrate as they traveled to his house.

The journey to the groom’s house usually occurred at night. So, the setting Jesus described was a torch lit procession. The *lamps* were technically *oil-soaked rags* wrapped around a stick to make a *torch*. Each bridesmaid would have had a torch and *a flask of oil* to pour on the torch. The oil would keep the torch burning until they

reached the groom's house, where they would have the formal wedding ceremony. Now, you have the setting of the parable.

Regarding the ten virgins, Jesus intends us to understand that all of the bridesmaids believed they were in His Kingdom. They represent church members. They are not unreached people or atheists. They are not practicing some other religion like Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Mormonism, or Jehovah's Witnesses. They are all people who attend an orthodox gospel-preaching church.

As Jesus tells the parable, we learn that five of the ten bridesmaids were ready for the wedding feast, and five were not. So, to feel the full impact of this parable, we need to consider the similarities between the bridesmaids. There are at least seven similarities.

First, all had been invited to the banquet. Each one had received an invitation to attend the wedding. They wanted to be part of the wedding party and the ceremony. This is like people who have *heard* the gospel and are called to repent of their sins and place their faith in the person and work of Jesus.

Second, they responded positively to the wedding invitation. These people heard the gospel and didn't reject it but embraced it. They anticipated the groom's return.

Third, they were part of the visible church. These people participated in the life of the church. They attended worship and joined the fellowship.

Fourth, they all had affection for the bridegroom. They were not indifferent to the gospel invitation. They received the invitation with joy and spoke affectionately about the bridegroom.

Fifth, they all confessed Jesus as their Lord. Now, the parable gets more intense. In v. 11, we learn that five of the bridesmaids were late to the ceremony and asked that the door to be opened to them. They cried out to the bridegroom:

"Lord, lord, open to us."

They called the bridegroom their Lord, but in the end, we see He was never their true Lord.

Sixth, they all believed they were waiting for the bridegroom to return. Brothers and sisters, churches are filled with people who believe Jesus will return, but the frightening fact is they are not prepared for His return. They are not born again. They profess a kind of faith in Jesus, but it is not genuine. Many of these people have been baptized and are church members, but they are not saved.

Finally, all of the bridesmaids fell asleep while waiting for the bridegroom. Listen, both true believers and false believers will struggle to stay awake while waiting for Jesus to return. Many may doze off at times while waiting for Christ's return. Here's the deal: Struggling as we wait for Jesus to return is not a sign of unbelief. Even Peter, James, and John fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus.

So, here is where the similarities end. At the midnight cry, the similarities between these bridesmaids vanish, and the critical difference between them is obvious. Five were ready for the bridegroom, and five were not.¹

This parable teaches us that there are two kinds of disciples. First, there are true disciples who are born again and have faith in Jesus. These are the wise bridesmaids.

Then there are the five of the bridesmaids who were foolish. They represent false disciples because they were not ready for the bridegroom to return. They were unprepared.

Verses 6-9 tell us about their unpreparedness and what happened to them:

*But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'*⁷ *Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps.*⁸ *And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'*⁹ *But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go*

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *An Expositional Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2, Matthew 18-28*, 526.

rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came. Those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut.¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’

Friends, there will always be people in the church who have heard the gospel and responded to it in some manner. They may even seem to have an affection or a type of love for Jesus, but in the end, they are not born again. They are false disciples who are not ready for Jesus’ return.

Here’s the key question: What does it mean to be ready for Jesus’ return? As I have already mentioned, it means you must be truly born again. New birth means there will be a transformation in your life. It doesn’t mean you will be perfect or never struggle or never sin. It does mean that your faith in Jesus produces works that come from a heart that has been given new life. It is the fruit of regeneration, and you have true love and affection for Jesus, His word, and His church.

On the question of what it means to be ready, the 19th-century Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon writes:

A great change has to be wrought in you, far beyond any power of yours to accomplish, [so that] you can go in with Christ to the marriage. You must, first of all, be renewed in your nature, or you will not be ready. You must be washed from your sins, or you will not be ready. You must be justified in Christ’s righteousness, and you must put on his wedding dress, or else you will not be ready. You must be reconciled to God, you must be made like to God, or you will not be ready. Or, to come to the parable before us, you must have a lamp, and that lamp must be fed with heavenly oil, and it must continue to burn brightly, or else you will not be ready. No child of darkness can go into that place of light. You must be brought out of nature’s darkness into God’s marvelous light, or else you will never be ready to go in with Christ to the marriage, and to be forever with him.²

The critical question from the parable is: Are you ready? The question is not: Have you been baptized? Or have you joined a church? These questions are very important things to do as Jesus’ disciples. However, doing them does not make you a Christian. Anyone can do these things and not be ready.

So, here’s the critical question: Have you been born again? Are you, by faith, living for Jesus? Or are you among those who outwardly look like a disciple but inwardly you know you are not?

Verses 11-13 tell us that there will be a Day of Judgment where He will separate the true disciples from the false. Look at vv. 11-12:

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’

In the same way, that the wicked servant in Matthew 24:51 was cut to pieces and thrown into the place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The false disciples will not be allowed into the Kingdom of God.

If you remember, in Matthew 22:11, the wedding guest was removed from the wedding because he lacked the wedding garment. In the same way, the foolish virgins lacked enough oil. Lacking oil simply means they

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Entrance and Exclusion,” in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), vol. 43, 30.

didn't have what was required. *What was lacking was works of righteousness produced from a regenerated heart that enabled them to wait a lifetime for Jesus to return.*

Jesus concludes the parable with a summary of His chilling words from the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to vv. 11-12 again:

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.'

In Matthew 7:21-23, we find the complete statement:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you.'

These words are key for helping us understand this parable. First, it is NOT that Jesus lacked knowledge of who these people were who stand before Him in judgment. He will know who they are. What He means when He says He doesn't know them is that He doesn't know them in the same way they say they know Him. These people use a term of intimacy when they say, "Lord, lord." At that moment, Jesus will tell them that the intimacy they claim between them doesn't exist.

Second, Jesus will say to them the final words of v. 23:

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

This is the defining characteristic of the foolish bridesmaids. Like the people in Matthew 7, they did good works and even did some mighty works, but they were not works that came from a heart that loved Jesus. Their works didn't come from faith in Jesus. So, they were not workers of righteousness but workers of lawlessness.

It doesn't mean they were as bad or wicked as they could be but that they were pretending to be Christians, and that is wicked. They probably did a lot of good works hoping they would be saved because of their good works. However, all the good works they did were done to make themselves look good. They did not do them to glorify God but to glorify themselves. It was an effort to earn righteousness.

You see, workers of lawlessness believe their good works will earn them salvation and right standing before God, but they don't. These works are not done by faith in Christ, which means they were not ready to meet the Bridegroom.

Jesus will expose these people on the Day of Judgment. He said in Matthew 7:22,

On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'

You see, their hope and faith were really grounded in works of righteousness or self-righteousness. Pastor Doug O'Donnell writes:

These five silly girls think if they can't get in on the backs of saints [who have oil and are prepared, then] gentle Jesus will surely let them in. They might [even try to] place the blame on [Jesus if they don't get in]. [They might say things like:]

"It's his fault, not mine. He came when I wasn't ready. He's better let me in."

They assume that the Jesus on Judgment Day is the Jesus of Christmas Day— little, harmless, non-threatening. Oh no. On that day, too late is too bad. Jesus will roar like a lion, not lie down like a lamb. The door will stay closed.³

Friends, the only righteousness that saves is the righteousness earned for you by Jesus. He earned your righteousness when He lived a perfectly sinless life on behalf of the elect. He perfectly kept God's law. He loved God with all of His heart, soul, mind, and strength and loved His neighbor in the same way He loved Himself. Then He paid for our unrighteousness by going to the cross and dying in our place for our sins. When Jesus rose from the dead, He broke the power of sin and death over His people. Now, all who are born again come to Jesus in faith and repentance because He transfers their sin to Himself, and His righteousness is given to them. *These are the ones who are ready and faithfully waiting to meet the Bridegroom, Jesus.*

Do you know what this means? It means on the Day of Judgment v. 12 will read differently for you. Jesus will say to you:

Truly, I say to you, I know you and love you. Come into the banquet, the Marriage Feast of the Lamb that has been prepared for you. As you have been waiting for Me, I have been waiting for you. Welcome to your new home that I have prepared for you.

Knowing Jesus will welcome His waiting saints home on the final day should renew our vigilance. So, Jesus says to us in v. 13:

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Verse 13 reminds us that we cannot simply make a profession of faith and then say that's enough. Verse 13 exhorts professing disciples to demonstrate the authenticity of their profession by diligent, loving obedience to Jesus and His teaching.

In this parable, Jesus calls us to a life of habitual obedience and good works. The foolish virgins tried to make up for their negligence and disobedience at the minute, but it was too late.

Conclusion: British poet Alfred Lloyd Tennyson captures the warning that is in this parable in his poem: "*Late, Late, So Late!*"

*Late, late so late! and dark the night and chill!
Late, late so late! but we cannot enter still.
"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now."*

*No light had we; for that we do repent;
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now."*

*No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!
O let us in, that we may find the light!
"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now."*

*Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!
"No, no; too late, too late! ye cannot enter now."⁴*

³ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Preaching the Word: Matthew*, 734.

⁴ Alfred Lloyd Tennyson quoted in Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Preaching the Word: Matthew*, 733.

Friends, we don't know when Christ will return, so we must be ready to wait if necessary. Don't wait until it is too late.

Friends, live your life as though Jesus could return today, but not only today; we must be ready to live for Jesus for the rest of our lives. Only the heart that has been born again will be ready, willing, and able to endure to the end. Are you ready? Have you been born again by the Holy Spirit of God?