

Broomfield



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The Parable of the Ten Virgins

It was Christ's last week of ministry. He had triumphantly entered Jerusalem.¹ He went to the temple on Sunday and there He cast out the money-changers and merchants who had so desecrated the temple.² For the last time, He taught His disciples and the crowds.³

Now, as Christ was leaving the temple area to go to the Mount of Olives, His disciples were moved by the beauty and splendor of the temple.

Matthew 24:1, "And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple."

The Temple was built with some stones measuring 40x12x12 feet and weighing up to 100 tons each. And to stand at the base of the temple truly would have been awe-inspiring. It was this exchange that prompted the discourse found in Matthew 24-25 in which Christ not only foretells of the coming destruction of the temple which would occur in 70 A.D. but also prophecies of the events surrounding His Second Coming.

The Setting

It is in the context of His teaching on His Second Coming that our Lord told the parable at which we are looking. Because He wanted His disciples, then and now, to be ready for His appearing, Christ told a series of parables in Matthew 24-25 to illustrate the kind of people we ought to be. One of these parables is the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Let's examine this parable looking first at its setting.

Matthew 25:1, "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom."

I have mentioned this on other occasions, but for those who have never heard: the obvious background of this parable is the Jewish Wedding ceremony. The wedding was the most celebrated occasion in Paul's day. Almost all in the town/city would be included. It was a time of great happiness, joy, and celebration.

¹ Compare Matthew 21:1-11

² Compare Matthew 21:12-17

³ Compare Matthew 21:23-23:39

The Jewish marriage consisted of three parts. The first of these was the engagement. Most often, this was arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom. This amounted to a contract of marriage. Here the couple had little involvement.

Secondly, we had the betrothal. This phase could last for weeks, months, or even a year. The purpose was to give the groom time to establish himself. To enter into the betrothal period, the bride and groom exchanged vows in the presence of their friends and family. At this point, they were considered legally married, yet they did not live together. And this is why Mary's pregnancy was an issue in her betrothal.⁴ If the groom died during this time, the woman would be considered a widow!

Thirdly, there was the wedding feast. At the end of the betrothal period, the Wedding Feast occurred. This could last as long as a week! Here a feast and multiple celebrations occurred which involved the entire community. It began when the groom accompanied by his groomsmen came to the bride's house. And according to the culture of Christ's day, the time of the groom's arrival would not have been set. Thus, the bride and her maids would ready themselves and then wait — sometimes for hours.

Now upon meeting the bride and her maids, the groom's party joined with the bride's party and together they paraded through the streets proclaiming that the wedding feast was about to begin. Now this usually occurred in the late evening, and thus we see the need for torches/lamps. In fact, notice not only would these lamps illumine the dark path but they also would have served to identify the wedding party. At the end of the feast period, a close friend of the groom took the bride's hand and placed it in the groom's, and the couple would be escorted to a room to be left alone together.

Now based on the description of verses 1-12, it is obvious that Christ is describing the typical wedding scene of His day, during the betrothal, yet right before the wedding parade.

There has been considerable debate as to the identity of “the virgins” of this parable. Are they the bridesmaids, servants in the Bridegroom's home, or friends or neighbors? While commentators can be found who argue for each of these, in light of the elements of the Jewish wedding at the time of Christ, the women of this parable correspond best to the function and role of the bridesmaid.

The Contrast

Matthew 25:2-5, “And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.”

This section contains what would have been a foolish, yet not unthinkable thing for the five bridesmaids to have done. Thinking that either that the Bridegroom would come sooner than later or that the bridal chamber would be stocked with oil these bridesmaids did not bring enough oil for their lamps in the case of a delayed wedding party. With this, notice some of the peculiarities of this section.

First the term *lamps*⁵ could be one of two types. These lamps could have been an oil-soaked rag wrapped on a stick. This would be what we would consider a torch. When it came time to use this “torch,” the

⁴ Compare Matthew 1:18-19

⁵ λαμπας lampas; from 2989; a torch

virgins would have “put their torches in order”⁶ by trimming, soaking, and lighting them.

Or these “lamps” could have been a small, enclosed pottery bowl with a small central hole which was used to feed the oil. Small handles were sometimes added to these hand lamps. The standard Palestinian lamp of Christ's day was plain, round, with a fairly wide flanged filling hole, and a flared nozzle for the wick, sloping downwards. By the first century, these lamps were mass-produced from molds, one making the base, the other the lid.

Now whichever lamp you choose, the result is the same: the foolish virgins failed to bring enough oil to keep their lamp alight.

The *oil*⁷ here typically was olive oil or fat, and could stay lit for two to four hours. However, to keep the lamp alight, the keeper needed to frequently trim the wick which was made of flax or other fiber⁸ And fill the oil reservoir in the case of a lamp.

The Surprise

Matthew 25:6-10, “And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.”

The sudden arrival of the bridegroom caught all the bridesmaids sleeping because it was late and the wait presumably had been long. However of the ten women, five were ready to go at a moment's notice.⁹ They cut off the ragged edges from the wick of their lamps or torches. They dipped the wicks in oil or filled their lamps. And then, they lit them.

Sadly, this wasn't the case for the other five, the foolish women. Their lamps were running low on oil.¹⁰ As such, they sought to borrow some of the prudent women's oil. Yet, the prudent bridesmaids couldn't spare any and still be responsible.

And thus, lest these five risk being excluded from the wedding ceremony for lack of a lamp, they needed to purchase some oil.¹¹ And this raises these questions: What 'dealer' would have been open at midnight? And aren't these women foolish to think that oil could have been purchased at this hour?

Not necessarily!

Most likely at this time of night, all “dealers” would have been closed. And yet, in another parable Christ

⁶ See verse 6 and the literal translation of it.

⁷ ελαιον *elaion*

⁸ Compare Isaiah 42:3, 43:17

⁹ Compare Matthew 25:7

¹⁰ Compare Matthew 25:8

¹¹ The importance of a lit lamp is understood if we equate the lamp of the wedding feast in Christ's day to the bridesmaid dress. Imagine a bridesmaid today arriving at the church having forgot her dress. She could ask to borrow the belt or the sash of another bridesmaid, but then both would be improperly dressed. What this foolish bridesmaid must do is retrieve her dress—much like the five foolish virgin's did when it came to their oil.

told¹² a neighbor knocks on his neighbor's door at midnight for some bread to serve to some out-of-town guests. The fact that Christ told both of these parables implies that the actions here were not an unheard of occurrence.

Furthermore, when one recalls that God's people lived in a covenant community which was much like an extended family the option of waking up a neighbor (who probably would have been awake for the wedding already) was not unthinkable.

The Denial

Matthew 25:11-12, "Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not."

Up to this point, a Jew listening to this parable would have been right with Christ. All were familiar with the joy and excitement of a wedding. "Stranger things have been known to happen" such that the actions of the foolish bridesmaids would have been believable and forgivable.

And yet, the parable takes a shocking turn. As weddings typically were community activities, ALL would have been welcomed. And yet here, the bridegroom (presumably) turns the foolish bridesmaids away, much like what Christ will do on the Last Day.

The Point

Now this brings us to the point of this parable. What is Christ teaching here? How are we to be exhorted?

Christ gives us the answer in verse 13.

Matthew 25:13, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."

Be ready for the appearing of the Lord. Live each day as if Christ's Second Coming were going to occur at any moment. Don't be lulled to sleep: Watch and Pray!

Now about a month ago we discussed this theme in relation to the parable of the talents and there made mention of the need for spiritual vigilance — that is live daily in light of the prospect of Christ's return. Be ready for His arrival.

And such is our need this day. Throughout Scripture, the Second Coming of Christ demands the response of readiness. As such, as the day draws near we must be all the more diligent to show ourselves approved of God.¹³ We must be diligent to present ourselves to God as a living and holy sacrifice.¹⁴ And we must be ready for the Lord¹⁵ by not holding on to the things of this world such as our jobs, houses, children or spouses. But we need to live as ones that have given all things to God!

¹² Compare Luke 11:5-8

¹³ Compare 2 Timothy 2:15

¹⁴ Compare Romans 12:1-2

¹⁵ Compare Matthew 26:40

Indeed, nothing less will fulfill Christ's exhortation here!

And yet having said this, I want you to notice that this particular parable lends itself to a specific exhortation. Most commentators, addressing the “foolish” of this parable, say something like this:

“The foolish brought no oil at all that was their folly. They brought their lamps; but failed to bring oil to make their lamps useable. Their foolishness is that that they went to the trouble of preparing for the bridegroom in every detail: They cleansed themselves. They dressed in the finest of clothes. They gathered at the appropriate time and place. They took their wedding lamps. And yet in spite of all of this, THEY DIDN'T BRING OIL! They came so close to participating in the wedding, and yet were disqualified on account of their not being prepared.”

Edersheim wrote this:

“The foolishness of the five Virgins... consisted, not in their want of perseverance... but in the entire absence of personal preparation...”¹⁶

What an important lesson for us today. Many in the church are like these “foolish” bridesmaids. They have been careful to secure most of what is necessary to be in a wedding party. They have their Bible studies. They attend church. They are active in a variety of ministries. They pray. They give to the poor. And yet, somehow they neglect the essential element of their participation in the wedding ceremony because they ignore that which makes their service acceptable to God. They have a “form of godliness” and yet have “denied its power.”¹⁷

Now depending on our relationship with the Lord, your neglect of “oil for your lamp” will vary. On the Last Day, there will be some who will have neglected the oil of faith in Christ for salvation.¹⁸ Just as we read of Christ's first advent that “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11) so also at Christ's Second Coming there will be many who profess faith in Christ and yet have never received Him.

Matthew 7:22-23, “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

What a shocking day that will be. Dr. John MacArthur wrote this:

“It will be a moment of sheer terror when unbelievers face a holy God and realize with absolute certainty that they are eternally lost. That must have been the feeling of the people of Noah's day when they saw the flood waters rise above their heads and knew the door to the ark was unalterably shut. Although the parable of the ten virgins illustrates the time of Christ's second coming, its truths apply to an unbeliever's facing God at death in any age. At that moment the opportunity for salvation will be past and all hope gone forever.”¹⁹

It is not enough that our spouse and children long for the Lord. It is not enough that our parents love the Lord. It is not enough to be associated with the work of God's kingdom. We OURSELVES must possess

¹⁶ The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Book II, page 457

¹⁷ Compare 2 Timothy 3:5

¹⁸ Compare Matthew 7:22-23

¹⁹ Dr. John MacArthur, *Commentary on Matthew 24-28*, page 92

Christ!

This is not to say that if you have Christ that you will be beyond surprise when it comes to the Last Day. For though we have Christ, many nevertheless in the church neglect Christ's.

Faith in Christ for Perseverance

Saul became the first king of Israel in 1051 BC. The people of God became a theocratic nation. Now throughout the reign of Saul, David, and Solomon the kingdom of Israel remained unified. But with the death of Solomon, and the promised cruel treatment of the people by Rehoboam, in 931 BC the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms. Israel in the North was ruled by Jeroboam. And Judah in the south was ruled by Rehoboam.

Now all things went along relatively easy for Judah until 734 BC. In and around 734 BC, the countries north of Judah were feeling the threat of Assyria. As a result, they joined together to form a unified opposition to the Assyrian threat. However Judah (the southern kingdom), under king Ahaz, refused to join. And so, the Northern Kingdoms marched against Judah in order to depose Ahaz and place someone on the throne who would join their coalition.

Now this was the promise that God made to Ahaz at this point in his life.

Isaiah 7:14-16, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings."

In essence, God's message to Ahaz was this: "Don't fear the enemy, I currently am delivering you! Don't shrink back into fear, trust Me! Rely upon the God who has saved you!"

Now amazingly, Ahaz would reject this promise from God and rather call upon the ASSYRIANS to protect them against the Northern Kingdoms. And brothers and sisters, so often this is the case for us. We, just like Ahaz, are surrounded by so many foes. And what is God's promise to us?

Matthew 1:22-23, "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

Now, when Jesus returns will He find us as the foolish or the wise virgins? Will we be living in NEGLECT of Christ? Will we be living in light of Christ?

And yet, do not misunderstand. If you are in Christ, then you will not be cast out — as were the five virgins of our parable. However, if you refuse to trust and so walk with Christ on a daily basis, you will suffer the loss of a deep and abiding relationship with Christ...

1 Corinthians 3:10-15, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay,

stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

May God grant us the grace to diligently live in light of the Kingdom as we await the coming of our Bridegroom!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 9, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.