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The Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

It was Christ's last week of ministry. Having triumphantly entered Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11), He went to the temple and there Jesus cast out the moneychangers and merchants who were desecrating the temple (Matthew 21:12-17). Then for the last time, He publicly taught His disciples and the crowds, Matthew 21:23-23:39.

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 came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him.”

The Temple was built with some stones measuring 40x12x12 feet and weighing up to 100 tons each. To stand at the base of the temple truly would have been awe-inspiring. Furthermore, it was this exchange that prompted the discourse found in Matthew 24-25 in which Christ NOT ONLY foretold the coming destruction of the temple which would occur in 70 A.D., BUT ALSO prophesied of the events surrounding His Second Coming.

It is in the context of His teaching on His Second Coming that our Lord told the parable of the ten virgins. 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.

Matthew 25:1, “Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom.”

The obvious background of this parable is the Jewish Wedding ceremony. Weddings were 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. That having been said the Jewish Marriage consisted of three parts:

- The Engagement — Most often, this was arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom and could occur when the children were quite young. This amounted to a contract of marriage. Here the couple obviously had little involvement.
- The Betrothal — This phase could last for weeks, months, or even a year. The purpose was to give the groom time to ready his house for his wife. 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. In fact, if there was unfaithfulness at this point, then the consequence was the same as if they committed adultery! If the groom died during this time, then the woman would be considered a widow! This is why Mary’s pregnancy was an issue for it occurred during the Betrothal period of her engagement to Joseph (cf. Matthew 1:18-19). He could have had her executed (cf. Leviticus 20:10).
- 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. 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 entire group together paraded through the streets proclaiming that the wedding feast was about to begin. This usually occurred in the late evening, and thus we see the need for torches/lampPsalm In fact, NOT ONLY would these lamps illumine the dark path, BUT they would have served to identify the wedding party. Think of bridesmaid's dresses in our culture.¹

Based on the description of vv. 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 bridesmaids? Servants in the Bridegroom's home? Friends? 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 that we ascribe to a bridesmaid.

Matthew 25:2-5, “And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lampPsalm Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep.”

This contains what would have been a foolish, yet not unthinkable thing for the five bridesmaids to have done. Thinking EITHER that the Bridegroom would come sooner than later OR that the bridal chamber would be stocked with oil, they 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.

- “Lamps”: λαμπάς (*lampas*); there are two possible “lamps” that could be in reference here. The first was a Torch which consisted of oil-soaked rags wrapped on a stick. When it came time for their use, the virgins would have “put their torches in order” (which is the literal translation in v. 6) by trimming, soaking, and lighting them. The second was a Hand Lamp- these were small, enclosed pottery bowls with a small central hole which was used to feed the oil. Small handles were sometimes added. 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.



By the first century, these lamps were mass-produced from molds, one making the base, the other the lid. Some have noted that there is another word in the Greek for these lamps, λύχνος (*luchnos*), as in Matthew 5:15. That being said, Christ account in the parable could

involve either one. Whichever lamp it was, the result is the same; the foolish virgins failed to bring enough fuel to keep their lamp alight.

- “Oil”: ἔλαιον (*elaion*); this typically was olive oil or fat and could stay alight for two to four hours. However, to keep the lamp alight, the keeper needed frequently (1) to trim the wick which was made of flax or other fiber (cf. Isaiah 42:3; 43:17) and (2) to fill the oil reservoir in the case of a lamp.

This brings us to the surprise.

Matthew 25:6-10, “But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the prudent answered, saying, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut.”

The sudden arrival of the bridegroom caught all the bridesmaids sleeping- it was late, and the wait presumably had been long. However, of the ten women, five were ready to go, notice (see v. 7). And so, they cut off the ragged edges from the wick of their lamps or torches, dipped the wicks in oil or filled their lamps, and lit them.

Sadly, this wasn’t the case for the other five — the foolish. Their lamps were running low on oil, v. 8. As such, they sought to borrow oil from the prudent, v. 8b. Yet, the prudent bridesmaids couldn’t spare any and be responsible, v. 9a. And thus, lest these five risk being excluded from the wedding ceremony for lack of a lamp (again, think of Bridesmaid’s dresses), they needed to purchase more oil.² This raises the question: What ‘dealer’ would have been open at 12:00 midnight? Aren’t all of these women foolish to think that oil could have been purchased at this hour? Actually, no!

We would think that at this time of night, all “dealers” would have been closed! Yet, recall another parable of Christ which He gave to instruct on prayer (Lk. 11:5-8). Here a neighbor knocks on a neighbor’s door at midnight for some bread to serve to some out-of-town guests. That Christ told both of these parables implies that the actions here were NOT an unheard-of occurrence. Furthermore, when we recall 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, vv. 11-12.

Matthew 25:11-12, “And later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, lord [cf. Matthew 7:22], open up for us.’ But he answered and said, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you. [cf. Matthew 7:23]’”

Up to this point, a Jew listening to this parable would have been tracking right along 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!

All of this brings us to the point of this parable. What is Christ teaching here? How are we to be exhorted this morning? Christ gives us the answer in Matthew.

Matthew 25:13, “Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.”

The word for “alert” (γρηγορέω [*grēgoreō*]) speaks of spiritual vigilance. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ exhorted His disciples this way:

Matthew 26:41a, “Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation...”

The idea behind this is sobriety, alertness, and so preparedness. And that is the focus of this parable!

All this speaks of the importance of spiritual vigilance. That is:

- Living daily in light of the prospect of Christ’s return,
- Being 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 diligent to:

- Show ourselves “approved of God,” 2 Timothy 2:15.
- “Present ourselves to God as a living and holy Sacrifice,” Romans 12:1.
- “Be ready” for the coming of Christ — NOT holding on to the things of this world...
 - Our jobs.
 - Our houses.

- Our children.
- Our spouse.

BUT living as ones who have given all things to God! Truly, nothing less will fulfill Christ's exhortation here!

And yet having said this, notice that this particular parable lends itself to a specific exhortation. Most commentators, addressing the "foolish" of this parable, say something like, "*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.*" In other words, the foolishness of the five virgins is seen in 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 lamPsalm

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! Alfred Edersheim put it this way:

The foolishness of the five Virgins... consisted, not in their want of perseverance... but in the entire absence of personal preparation... (Edersheim, 1992, pp. 457, Book II)

What an important lesson for us! So many in the church are like these "foolish" bridesmaids. They have been careful to secure *most* of what is necessary to be in the 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 they have neglected an essential element when it comes to their participation in the Wedding Ceremony. They have ignored that which makes all their "service" acceptable. They have a "form of godliness" and yet have "denied its power" (2 Timothy 3:5).

Now depending on our relationship with the Lord, your neglect of "oil for your lamp" will vary. For some, it will be in their neglecting the oil of faith in Christ for their salvation, Matthew 7:22-23. Just as we read of Christ's first advent:

John 1:11, "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him."

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 on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" -

What a shocking day that will be! MacArthur wrote:

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. (MacArthur, 1989, p. 92)

It is NOT enough that our parents profess a love the Lord, attend church, teach in Sunday school, or even share the gospel. We OURSELVES must possess Christ! So, let me ask you these questions:

- Why are you saved?
- Why do you believe that at your death, you will be welcomed into heaven?

If your answer involves you in any way — working, believing, serving — you most likely are NOT saved! What is the only answer? Because of the sacrifice of Christ on my behalf!

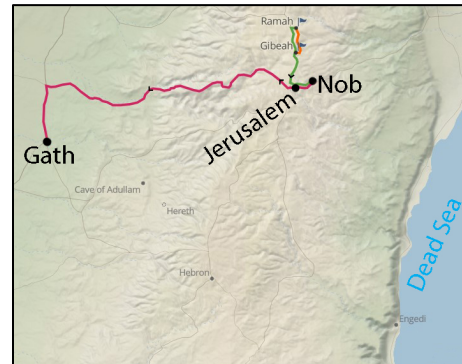
For others, it will be in their neglecting the oil of faith in Christ for their well-being,

1 Samuel 21:10-12, "Then David arose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish king of Gath. But the servants of Achish said to him, 'Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands'? And David took these words to heart, and greatly feared Achish king of Gath."

You may recall the story of David's rise to being King of Israel. God had selected David to be the next king (1 Samuel 16:9) after Saul disqualified himself from being king (1 Samuel 15:23). Yet the change of power would NOT occur until Saul's death. However, the seeds had been sown for Saul to hate David who as a young man clearly was blessed by God!

You know the story. As the future king, David went from being a favorite of Saul (even living in Saul's house) to being a fugitive on the run for his life as Saul sought his death. David's fugitive status began when he fled unarmed to the city of Nob (a priestly city) where he ate of the consecrated bread and was given Goliath's sword (1 Samuel 21:1-9).

From here, David fled 30 miles to the Philistine city and former home of Goliath... the city of Gath. Here and all alone, he hoped that he would NOT be recognized (even though he had the Philistines' sword in his hand!).



This was a low time for David! The text is very clear: David's lack of trust in God as it pertained to Saul led to a more dire situation where now he "greatly feared Achish king of Gath" (v. 12)!! Yet this is what happens when we give in to fear!! Things go from bad to worse to dire — it did in David's life.

1 Samuel 21:13, "So he disguised his sanity before them, and acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard."

This is the "beloved of God." A man after God's own heart!

How does all of this relate to our parable? If you are in Christ, then you will not be cast out- as were the 5 virgins of our parable. However, if you refuse to trust and so walk with Christ (but resort to self-effort and self-trust), you will suffer the loss of your well-being as a Christian! That is the story of David!

Yet listen to the lesson he learned from this. It is recorded in Psalm 34 which bears this superscription in the Hebrew, "A Psalm of David when he feigned madness before Abimelech..." How long was David in his humiliated state? We do not know. Yet listen to what raised David up from his dire situation.

Psalm 34:4, 6-9, "I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. [At first, David filled the lamp of his heart with the oil of self-trust, BUT this only led to despair! When he finally bottomed out, he was brought back to the glory of trusting Christ!...]... This poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them. O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! O fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him, there is no want."

Christian, this is the oil which only can enflame our passion and service in the Lord — the oil of faith!

Proverbs 29:25, “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted.”

It is this oil, the oil of faith, that NOT ONLY redeems the soul from sin, BUT also provides for the health and welfare of our soul on a daily basis!

Isaiah 40:31, “Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up *with* wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”

May God give us all the grace to fan into flame this glorious calling!

References

- Edersheim, A. (1992). *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Peabody: Hendrickson Pub.
- MacArthur, J. (1989). *Matthew 24-28 (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series Book 4)*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

End Note(s)

¹ 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.

² 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 virgins did when it came to their oil.