

(5) Matthew 25.1-13

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is part of a long parenthesis from 24.32-25.30. The Lord is illustrating his teaching with a series of parables designed to warn of the need for *watchfulness*, *readiness* and *faithfulness* in the lives of His earthly people living *during* the tribulation and imminently *expecting* the coming Christ in glory to earth.

The Olivet Parenthesis (24.32-25.30)		
Passage	Title	Key Theme
24.32-35	Parable of the <i>Fig Tree</i>	<i>Watchfulness</i> <i>Readiness</i>
24.36-42	Parallel of the <i>Days of Noah</i>	
24.43-44	Parable of the <i>Householder</i>	
24.45-51	Parable of the <i>Stewards</i>	Faithfulness
25.1-13	Parable of the <i>Ten Virgins</i>	<i>Watchfulness</i> <i>Readiness</i>
25.14-30	Parable of the <i>Talents</i>	Faithfulness

Matthew 25 divides easily into *three* parts. **1.** The Marriage and the Guests (25.1-13). **2.** The Merchant and his Gains (25.14-30). **3.** The Monarch and His Glory (25.31-46). The warning to the Jewish people is clear. Because of unbelief, the nation missed the first coming of Christ and were judged (temporally) in AD70. They must not be unprepared for His second coming or else miss the blessing of the kingdom and face eternal judgment. The three sections are tied together by the thought of *separation* for the Second Coming is day of reckoning There will be separation between the saved and the lost (cf. vv.10, 30, 32). *Scofield: "The second coming of Christ will be a testing of the profession of discipleship. The rapture will be a test of the profession of Christianity."*

Before considering the parable of the Ten Virgins, it is necessary to have a simple understanding of the stages involved in a Jewish wedding. [Taken from notes by *John F Walvoord, Alfred Edersheim, Jim Allen and John MacArthur*]

- **First**, the father of the groom arranged for the bride and paid a bride price (dowry). The betrothal followed at which the bride was given a token (piece of money or letter) and formal expression of espousal (Exodus 22.16; Deuteronomy 20.7). After the betrothal, the couple was considered married (only dissolved by a formal divorce), even though it was not yet physically consummated, and the couple did not yet live together (cf. 2 Samuel 3.14). If the husband died during the betrothal, the bride was considered a widow. The betrothal could last up to a year, during which time the groom would establish himself in a business or trade and make provision for a place to live.
- **Second**, at the end of the betrothal period, the groom would go from his home to the home of the bride to claim her as his own. The bride, prepared for his coming, would then be escorted to his home. This was often done in accompaniment with a *wedding procession*, which traditionally took place at night. Friends would join the procession parading through the streets loudly saluting the couple and praising the virtues of the bride. Lamps or torches were used by the wedding party to light the way.
- **Third**, the legal marriage ceremony took place at which the bride and groom exchanged vows in the presence of an invited few. "A formal legal instrument, called the *Kethubah*, was signed, which set forth that the bridegroom undertook to work for her, to honour, keep, and care for her, as is the manner of the men of Israel."
- **Fourth**, the marriage supper or feast would follow, lasting up to seven days depending upon the wealth of those involved. Many others, not invited to the ceremony, were invited to the feast.

The parable of the Ten Virgins emphasises the need for *spiritual* preparation in light of the coming Bridegroom. Those who were prepared enjoyed the kingdom festivities. The ten are very much alike. "All make profession of spiritual chastity, all profess to be light-bearers, all fall asleep while the bridegroom tarries." But there is a *secret* difference – five have no oil in their vessels. Thus, five represent those who are *sincerely* prepared for the coming bridegroom, five represent those who are *superficially* prepared. Possession of the Holy Spirit (oil) is the essential distinction.

The Marriage Call [vv.1-5]

v.1: 'Then' places this parable in the time of the tribulation, specifically, the immediate days before the unexpected return of Christ in glory. This parable, as the immediately preceding verse (24.51) deals with judgment in view of the kingdom. It is at this time, the 'kingdom of heaven' could be *compared* to, or *illustrated* by, the ten virgins. There does not appear to be any major difference between the 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven'. The entry requirements for both are the same – true conversion (Matthew 18.3; John 3.5). The 'kingdom of God' is a phrase that underscores

the Person to whom the kingdom *belongs* – **God**. The ‘kingdom of heaven’ refers to the *source* of that kingdom – rule from **heaven**, which will ultimately be manifested on earth in the millennial kingdom (Daniel 2.44; 7.13-14).

The ‘ten virgins’ are the equivalent of bridesmaids, unmarried friends of either the bride or bridegroom, awaiting the procession from the bride’s home to join in the festivities of the marriage feast. Custom demanded bridesmaids be chaste, unmarried women. They represent the *state of profession* of Jewish disciples during the tribulation. ‘Virgins’ are used because *great spiritual fornication* is abroad from any association with the number or name of the Beast. These virgins thus stand apart from the moral and spiritual corruption of the day. Likewise, those in waiting for Christ should be characterised by moral purity. *2 Corinthians 11.2: I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.* Paul sought to protect the saints from being drawn away (by false teachers) from the pure devotion (affection) that belongs only to Christ. The number ‘ten’ probably denotes *completeness* (the minimum number required to celebrate the Passover or establish a synagogue). It is also a number that speaks of *responsibility* (ten commandments).

The virgins ‘took their lamps’ (torches), which could have been small oil-fed lamps or as simple as oil-soaked rags wrapped around sticks and held aloft. In either case, the oil would require replenishment on a regular basis. The lamps represent the light of *testimony*. The nation of Israel has always had a light-bearing responsibility (Exodus 19.5-6). Believers today, too, should bear witness to the word of God in the power of the Spirit (Philippians 2.15-16). The virgins ‘went forth’ (exited) to ‘meet the bridegroom’. They had a messianic hope that separated and called them out from the spiritual fornication of the day, that is, all that is religiously false (unscriptural) and dishonours Christ (cf. Hebrews 13.13). The ‘bridegroom’ represents the Messiah (Matthew 9.15; Mark 2.19-20; John 3.27-30). The word ‘meet’ was often used of the official welcoming of a dignitary (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4.17). Syriac and Vulgate versions add ‘went forth to meet the bridegroom **and** the bride’. This is unlikely to be authentic but given its place in early manuscripts it does suggest the early church distinguished between the bride and the virgins.

v.2: The virgins are divided into *two* equal groups – *five* are ‘wise’ and *five* are ‘foolish’. The wise represent *sincere*, genuine believers – they have prepared for the bridegroom’s coming with a reserve of oil (v.4). The foolish represent *superficial* professing believers. They say they have a messianic hope but make no (spiritual) preparation for His coming (cf. v.3). Perhaps these individuals only had eyes for the physical benefits (festivity) of the kingdom rather than the Bridegroom Himself. The word ‘foolish’ is *moros*, from which we take the English ‘moron’. **v.3:** The foolish are so designated because they ‘took no oil’ with their lamps. The lamps could only hold a small amount of oil (if any at all), so it was customary to carry extra oil in a vessel so the lamps could be replenished. Oil is a plain symbol of the Holy Spirit. It is not that the foolish *ran out* of oil, but ‘took no oil’, that is, they never had oil to begin with. Here, then, are individuals that have a form of godliness but no genuine work of the Spirit in their lives. They were, no doubt, committed to the Messiah *religiously, emotionally and intellectually, but not vitally!* **v.4:** The wise were different. They ‘took oil’ and were therefore prepared, for the bridegroom was longer than expected. It is possible the ‘vessels’ speak of the human body, in which case there is a picture of the indwelling Spirit. Though the residence of the Spirit is removed at the rapture, the ministry of the Holy Spirit continues in the tribulation (Revelation 5.6). There is only one thing that will keep the light of our testimony burning brightly in the darkness of this age – the Spirit of God (Galatians 5.16, 25).

The Midnight Cry [vv.5-10]

v.5: The word ‘tarried’ is the same as ‘delayeth’ (24.48). The bridegroom took longer than expected to arrive. Of course, the coming of Christ will not be delayed from the divine perspective, but from the human. Given the lateness of the hour, they ‘all slumbered and slept’. The Greek is expressive, suggesting a nodding of the head and falling into a light sleep (slumber) before sleeping profoundly. The sleeping *may* suggest a decline in their anticipation of the bridegroom’s coming with associated weariness in testimony. This was true of all, even the genuine. Believers today can easily lose sight of the imminence of the rapture. Ephesians 5.14 presents the figure of a battlefield – with those who are *dead*, and those who are *sleeping*. It is difficult to distinguish between them as they look similar, but to those who are just sleeping, there is the call to ‘awake’ and stand out from amongst the dead.

v.6: The virgins were soon woken by the ‘midnight’ cry, likely an invitation to join the procession. In scripture, midnight is associated with judgment (Exodus 11.4-5; 12.29; Judges 16.3) and symbolic of the darkest hour. At this time ‘a cry was made’ – something sudden and dramatic rending the air – announcing the arrival of the bridegroom. This may equate to the abomination of desolation at the midpoint of the tribulation, or other attendant signs, even the sign of the coming of the Son of man (24.30). **v.7:** The virgins ‘arose’ and ‘trimmed (adorned) their lamps’. Trimming the lamps probably involved immersing the rags in oil and *relighting* or *replacing* the burnt rags with new oil-soaked rags. **v.8:** The cry causes the foolish to suddenly realise their mistake. Though they were *associated* with, and outwardly *like* the other virgins, they were not properly prepared. ‘Our lamps are gone out’ indicates they discovered their lack of oil when

lighting the lamps. The wicks would merely flicker and smoke with no reservoir of oil to sustain the flame. Many alarming discoveries will be made when Christ comes. *RC Trench: "When Christ comes, it will be impossible for any to remain [any] longer ignorant of their true state, for that day will be a revelation of the hidden things of men, of things hitherto hidden even from themselves; a flood of light will then pour into all the darkest corners of all hearts and show every man to himself exactly as he is; so that self-deception will be possible no longer."*

v.9: The frantic request of the foolish for oil (v.8) is refused as there would not be sufficient oil for all, thus bringing shame on the procession, and ultimately the bridegroom and his bride. The lesson is clear. Spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ **cannot** be *transferred* or *shared*. It is personal. Likewise, the work of the Spirit is individual, and each must have his own relationship with Christ. The imperative to 'go' to them that sell, and 'buy for yourselves' does not suggest salvation, and indeed the Spirit of God, can be purchased with money. Rather, a transaction is required with divine persons whereby a person freely receives the gift of salvation (cf. Isaiah 55.1). They must go to the source (of the oil), of which there are only *two* – the Father (John 4.14; 7.38-39; 14.16) and the Son (John 15.26). **v.10:** It was whilst the foolish 'went to buy' the bridegroom came. They were too late. The wise are characterised as 'ready' and go in to the 'wedding feast' or 'banquet' (JND). All who have experienced a genuine work of the Spirit will be 'ready' to inherit the glorious future blessings God has prepared for His people. Note. Whilst the marriage *ceremony* of the Lamb takes place in heaven (Revelation 19.7), the marriage *supper* (or feast) is the celebration on earth (Revelation 19.9; Luke 12.37; 13.29). Finally, the 'door was shut' to *stay shut* (cf. Genesis 7.16). The closed door speaks of security and bliss for those on the inside, but untold sorrow (judgment) for those on the outside.

The Mistaken Claim [vv.11-13]

v.11: The 'other' virgins make the claim of knowing the bridegroom as 'Lord'. The repetition 'Lord, Lord' emphasises fervency, but all their religious language cannot hide the fact they were spiritually unprepared for the coming of Christ. Remarkably similar language is used in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 7.21-23). Those individuals had the pious talk of religion, but no reality was evident in their living. They failed to do the will of the Father, being habitual workers of lawlessness. **v.12:** 'Verily' is a word of emphasis meaning 'most assuredly'. The bridegroom's refusal is therefore emphatic. There was no hope of the door being opened. 'I know you not' proves there was no *spiritual* relationship between the Bridegroom and those who claimed Him as Lord. Thank God, even the weakest and most fallible of believers has a spiritual relationship with Christ and is therefore known of Him (cf. John 10.14; 1 John 2.13). **v.13:** The parable concludes with the familiar exhortation, 'Watch therefore' (cf. 24.42). The basic meaning is 'give strict attention' or 'be vigilant' referring to the *spiritual* preparation of salvation. The foolish virgins *should* have taken oil.

In summary, John F Walvoord says, *"Just as the ten virgins will be tested by the question of a genuine work of the Spirit represented by the oil, so the professing church will be tested at the rapture. Only those in Christ and regenerated by the Spirit of God will be eligible for inclusion in the heavenly union of Christ and the church. In a modern world where churchianity has so often replaced reality in spiritual things, and church membership and mere outward conformity of religious exercises is substituted for a genuine work of the Spirit, the warning of Christ to the ten virgins may be understood as a warning to the church today."*