

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, <sup>4</sup> but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' <sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' <sup>9</sup> But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' <sup>10</sup> And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' <sup>12</sup> But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' <sup>13</sup> Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

## Introduction

I am going to cover the parable of the ten virgins today in three main points: summarization, characterization, and application. Let us begin with a summary.

### 1A. Summarization

Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven with ten virgins who **took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom** (v. 1). Regarding these virgins, five were wise and five were foolish because the former took containers of oil along with their lamps while the latter **took no oil with them** (v. 3). Next, as the story goes, there is a delay in the coming of the bridegroom and, consequently, all the virgins fell asleep. At midnight, someone announced the coming of the bridegroom. Therefore, all the virgins rose and prepared their lamps, but the lamps of the foolish began to go out, so they asked the wise to give them some of their oil. The wise virgins refused to give them some oil; instead, they said, **"Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves"** (v. 9). They went to buy from the dealers, and while they were gone, the bridegroom came, and **those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut** (v. 10). When the foolish virgins returned from the marketplace, they asked the groom to let them into the feast, but he refused telling them that he has no idea who they are. Then Jesus drew the conclusion: **"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"** (v. 13).

### 2A. Characterization

To set out the character of this parable, we will consider its distinguishing features, odd or striking facts, and its disturbing elements.

#### 1B. Distinguishing features

##### 1) Persons

The persons to whom our Lord refers in the parable are the virgins and the bridegroom. Virgin is not a biological reference, as those who still maintain their virginity. We can simply think of them as bridesmaids, some of whom could be married. Biological virginity contributes nothing to the flow of the parable. Thus, some commentators think that the parable of the virgins presents the "female counterpart" to the parable of the wise and faithful servant. However, when we look back at the three previous exhortations as a unit (24.37-51), we clearly see that the call to duty here is a call to all men and women in the human family because Jesus states that His angels will leave some men and some women behind when they gather His elect (24.31, 40-41). Granted, women might identify with this parable more readily than men might, but the parable of the virgins applies to both men and women equally, just as the parable of the wise servant applies to both men and women equally.

The groom is the only other person in the parable. Who is not in the parable, someone that you might expect to be there? There is no mention of the bride. Even the friends of the groom are in the distant background of the vague reference to someone that announced the arrival of the groom (v. 6, **there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom!'**). Hence, all the emphasis is on the coming of the bridegroom and the readiness of the bridesmaids.

## 2) Contrast

There are ten bridesmaids, but Jesus states that five are foolish and five are wise. The contrast between wisdom and folly centers on the fact that some took extra oil along with the oil already in the lamps while the others did not do this. In other words, the wisdom of the wise was such that as they went out to meet the groom with a sense of immediacy, they also prepared for the possibility of some delay. The foolish bridesmaids did not look beyond the present moment; they were unprepared for any delay (which means they were unprepared, period).

## 3) Main event

The main event is the coming of the groom. When he came, all the bridesmaids trimmed their lamps for the processional into the place of celebration, but the lamps of the foolish bridesmaids began to sputter and go out. They then went to the dealers to buy some oil. While they were gone, the groom arrived, all who were present (and ready, 25.10) went with him into the wedding feast, and they shut the door. The foolish bridesmaids missed the processional.

## 2B. Odd facts

As we try to get the message of the parable, we have to consider things that are striking, that stand out as possible keys to interpretation. It turns out that the unusual facts fill out the story line in a subordinate way. That is how they contribute to our understanding.

### 1) Time

The bridesmaids are out somewhere late into the night. This has an odd ring against the backdrop of the usual conduct of women in that culture. Where do they sleep? What is in place for their protection? Questions like these go unanswered because they are unimportant. The fact that it is nighttime is essential to the use of oil lamps. The lateness of the hour contributes to the emphasis on delay in the coming of the bridegroom, and it connects this parable with the coming of a thief at night in the previous parable (24.43). The timing clearly speaks of delay that applies to the coming of Christ.

### 2) Sleep

It is striking that both the wise and unwise sleep. This parable is about watching (25.13), which refers to staying awake, alert, and ready as the wise servants of the previous parable (24.45). Nevertheless, in this parable, Jesus speaks of wise people sleeping along side of unwise people. What are we to make of this variation? It is exactly that, variation. Moreover, it goes with the mixture of wheat and weeds until the harvest (Mat. 13.24-30) while business goes on as usual until the separation comes: **Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left.** <sup>41</sup> **Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left** (24.40-41).

### 3) Late night market places

It seems odd in that day and age to have dealers open to sell lamp oil at any time of night. Would shops remain open all night for buying and selling of oil? That seems unlikely. This aspect of the story contributes to the “business as usual” tone, and it allows for a different “take” on what happens when Christ returns. Instead of the simple “one is taken and another left,” we now have a story that speaks about what people will say when the groom arrives. We hear from the wise, the unwise, and the groom. This brings us to the disturbing elements of the parable.

## 3B. Disturbing elements

Now, no doubt, we come to the distinct message of this parable in relation to the other parables of the Olivet Discourse. We can accent the disturbing elements as the basis for the application that follows.

### 1) Unwillingness to share

The wise (and thus commended persons in the parable) refuse to share of their abundance of oil with those who lack sufficient supply. Is the treatment of the foolish by the wise heartless and unloving? Does it lack friendship, sympathy, and social solidarity? Is this true wisdom? How can it be biblical wisdom? Biblical wisdom involves moral uprightness, godliness, and neighborly love. This is definitely a troubling element in the parable.

### 2) Shutting the door

Would you not think that the door to the house of celebration would remain wide open for the entire wedding party? This is a subtle hint in the story line that something ominous is about to happen. It has the ring of being left behind (**one will be taken and one left, 24.20**). Now, those “left behind” are “shut out.” If get involved in the story, then, intuitively, we may cry out for an open door. After all, these bridesmaids are special friends and family members of the groom too, are they not?

### 3) Use of the term lord

Bridesmaids are usually (even back then) family and friends of the bride and groom, but the foolish bridesmaids speak to the groom in formal language. They speak as if they are servants before a master or inferiors in relation to a superior (**Lord, lord, open to us, 25.11**). This is disturbing if you sink your thoughts into the story and identify with the characters of the story.

### 4) The reply of the groom

This is most disturbing of all. It is unexpected, out of character for a story about a wedding party coming late to a festive processional. They beg for admittance; they do so, granted, in language that speaks of distance and not of friendship. At this point in the story, we may be in for a shock. The groom seems distant, unfriendly, and even harsh. You might think that the groom is unfair because his delay caused the first supply of oil to burn out. In the end, it is disturbing to have such a sad ending in the context of the pleasantries of the marriage analogy. There is feasting and celebration for some while others remain outside with the door permanently shut.

## 3A. Application

Jesus closes the story by drawing a concluding application: **Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour** (25.13). The exhortation to watch is short for what He said earlier about being alert, ready, wise, and faithful (24.36-51). We know this because watching in the conclusion (25.13) must go with being a wise person (25.2b, 8-9). Whether you are male or female, the lesson here of the bridesmaids applies to you.

Notably, Jesus grounds His exhortation in what you do not know (**for you know neither the day nor the hour**). He does not mention His coming. You might ask, “What is it that I do not know?” He speaks simply of the day and hour. If we compare this phrase with the previous exhortations (**Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming, 24.42**), then we know that Jesus speaks here of His coming. If we add the initial reference to the kingdom (**the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins, 25.1**), then we know that He speaks here of His coming as the equivalent of the coming of the kingdom. His coming will bring about the consummation of the kingdom (the final “not yet” of what is already coming “now”; cf. Mat. 11.11-12).

Thus, Jesus uses this parable to exhort His disciples, both them and us, to wise watchfulness. You and I have another exhortation to be alert, ready, wise, and faithful in light of the fact that though there is a delay in His coming, today could be the glad day.

How does this parable move this exhortation forward? What is distinctive about the parable that motivates disciples, that motivates you, to wise watchfulness? Surely, you will find your answer in the disturbing elements of the story. If you absorb the final words into your hearts, then this parable will move you to walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise making the best use of the time (Eph. 5.15-16).

The final words come from the wise, the unwise, and the groom.

### 1B. What point do you get from what they say?

At the time the groom comes, the wise say to the unwise, “no, we cannot share of our readiness with you.” Outside the door to the wedding feast, the unwise say to the groom, “Lord, lord, let us into the joys of the celebration.” To the unwise, the groom says, “no, you cannot enter the joys of the celebration because I do not know you.”

Surely, the point that comes home to the heart with great force is that when Jesus comes it will then be forever too late to prepare to meet God. The Lord’s people (those who are wise,

ready, and awaiting His return), will have nothing to share with unbelievers (those who are unprepared for His coming). Even if they ask, they will not receive; the day of asking and receiving will be gone forever. Furthermore, even the acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord will then be too late. The day is coming when every person will acknowledge the Lordship of Christ.

**Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2.9-11).**

However, when fools make this acknowledgement, they do so from outside the wedding feast. Jesus shuts the door permanently on those who are not alert, ready, wise, and faithful. Most alarming of all, the Lord Jesus will say these weighty words to fools: “**Truly, I say to you, I do not know you**” (25.12). This has to take us back to the similar words in the Sermon on the Mount.

**<sup>21</sup> "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. <sup>22</sup> 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?' <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Mat. 7.21-23).**

Clearly, the unwise are people who have no intimate love for Christ (the unwise bridesmaids speak to the groom from a great relationship distance), and the Lord Jesus has no love for them. These are disturbing words indeed. We could never even think to utter such words, if Jesus did not give them to us. When He comes, He will tell some people that He has no love for them; He does not know them; they must remain outside of the joys of His wedding celebration. Do we have disturbing elements in this parable? Yes, we do; truly, these are sobering and disturbing words.

2B. How do you take these words home to your heart and life?

Without question, Jesus says to you, “Be alert, ready, wise, and faithful now because I may come at any unexpected day or hour, and when I come it will be too late to ready yourself then.”

You may ask, “Well, how do I ready myself now on life’s journey?”

1) You ready yourself for His coming by making the choice of love for God above all earthly things. You must love Him from the heart and not simply call Him “Lord” from a distance. As Jesus said, **<sup>24</sup> “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Mat. 7.24).** You must choose Him above all else as the delight of your heart. This is an ultimate commitment to Him. Here you give yourself away to be His forever in all the things of life.

2) You ready yourself for His coming by building your life on the rock of His word. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made this point emphatically.

**<sup>24</sup> "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (Mat. 7.24-27).**

This explains how the Lord will find you “so doing” at His return (**Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes, Mat. 24.46**). You are wise if you hear His words and build your entire life on them. Then the floods of divine judgment that God will pour out at the coming Christ will not destroy your life because **Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock (Mat. 7.24-25).**

In other word, you ready yourself by working out your salvation with fear and trembling. Paul states that every knee shall bow to Christ (Phil. 2.10) and then, on that basis, exhorts to the hard work of the Christian life: **<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2.12-13).** Thus, knowing that God is at work in you, be about the doing of the work with a sense of awe before Him.

**To our God and Father be glory forever and ever, amen.**