

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

📖 Matthew 25:1-13

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We are studying the Olivet Discourse, what I like to call *The Discourse on Kingdom Coming* because it sketches the conditions in the world that immediately precede His coming in His kingdom. Jesus says the days leading up to the Second Coming are going to be just like the days of Noah in that they will be characterized by signs that herald the nearness of great judgment. These signs demand that people deviate from the normal routines of life and prepare for His coming judgment. The way to prepare is to trust in Jesus as the Messiah. Only those prepared with salvation will enter the kingdom.

Last time we continued with the exhortations to alertness and preparedness that begin with the parable of the fig tree in 24:32. The growth cycle of the fig tree teaches us that when its branch is tender and it has put forth its leaves we know that summer is near. In the same way, when all the events of the tribulation begin to take place the nation Israel is to know that the coming of the Son of Man is near. This idea controls everything that follows. In other words, just like in the days of Noah the time of the flood could be known in general, though not exactly, so the general timing of His Second Coming can be known generally, though not exactly. And just like the flood, some will be prepared with salvation and some will not. Those not prepared will be swept away in judgment. Therefore, there is good warrant for getting prepared with salvation as soon as one recognizes the signs.

In 24:42 the message to the whole house of Israel living in that time is to be on the alert. The Greek word means watchful so that they recognize the events as signs of the nearness of His coming. 24:43 uses a parable of the head of a house and a thief coming to break in the house in order to show them the importance of being alert like the head of the house so that they are not surprised by His coming. In 24:44 since they can't know the exact moment of His coming in judgment they must be prepared. The only way to be prepared is to trust in Jesus for salvation.

In 24:45-51 the parable of a master and his appointed slaves shows the master going away and appointing some slaves to be in charge of the others during his absence. The slaves in charge are responsible to recognize the proper time to feed the other slaves. When the master returns he judges those put in charge according to how well they discharged their responsibility. Those who fulfilled their responsibility are faithful and prudent and

therefore put in charge of more of the master's possessions. Those who did not are evil and condemned, assigned a place with the hypocrites. Of course, the master is Jesus. The slaves are the nation Israel. The slaves put in charge of others are the leadership of the nation Israel. The faithful and wise slave is the Jewish leader who recognizes the signs of Jesus' coming and prepares the people of Israel by telling them to place their faith in Jesus in order to avoid judgment and enter kingdom blessing. In 24:46 the faithful and wise leader of Israel will be fortunate because Christ will reward him with great responsibility over His possessions in the kingdom. On the other hand, in 24:48 the evil slave is the Jewish leader who does not recognize the signs of His coming and does not point the people of Israel to faith in Jesus in order to avoid judgment. In 24:49 the leader's failure to recognize the signs and prepare the people results in slothful living. As a consequence, in 24:50, when Jesus comes in His kingdom they will be caught off guard and in 24:51 because of their lack of preparedness they will be condemned and assigned a place in hell with the hypocritical Pharisees where they will suffer eternal torment. I think it is a mistake to interpret this in a general way referring to all people at the final judgment and I think it is a mistake to interpret this as referring to faithful vs unfaithful Christians at the rapture and judgment seat of Christ. The context is the second coming and the judgment on the believing vs unbelieving leadership of Israel. Of the expression "weeping and gnashing of teeth" Toussaint said, "Invariably throughout Matthew this phrase refers to the retribution of those who are judged before the millennial kingdom is established (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30)."¹ The teaching is clear; the leadership of the nation Israel are responsible to recognize the signs of the Tribulation time as heralding the coming of the Son of Man and prepare the nation by pointing them to faith in Him. Those who do are believers and will be rewarded for their faithfulness as they enter the kingdom. Those who do not are unbelievers and will not enter the kingdom at all.

The overriding idea of this passage is that because the exact moment of Jesus' coming cannot be known they must be ready. The moment He arrives He will judge both Jews and Gentiles for entrance into the kingdom. The judgment follows an order. First, the leadership of the house of Israel. This is taught by the parable of the two servants in 24:45-51. Only the faithful and prudent servant will enter the kingdom with reward. The evil servant won't enter the kingdom at all. Second, the judgment of the house of Israel. This is taught by the parable of the ten virgins in 25:1-13. In it Jesus picks up the characteristic of prudence from the first parable and applies it to the average Jew. The prudent Israeli will be prepared with salvation so that when Christ comes he will be fit to enter the kingdom. Those who are not prudent will not enter at all. Third, another parable about the judgment of the house of Israel. This is the parable of the talents in 25:14-30. This parable picks up on the characteristic of faithful from the first parable and applies it to the average Jew. The faithful Israeli will have been involved in service so that when Christ comes he will be rewarded as he enters the kingdom. Those who are not faithful do not even have salvation and will be shut out of the kingdom. Fourth, the judgment of the Gentiles. This is taught by the sheep and the goats in 25:31-46. That shows you where we're going. Today our concern is the second and third parables which relate to the whole house of Israel. They grow out of the first parable. M'Neile says, "In XXIV. 45 the slave was 'faithful and prudent;' the present parable gives an instance of *φρονιμοι* [prudent], the following

of πιστοι [faithful].”² Again I think that it is a mistake to bring the Church into these parables. The context is Israel in the tribulation time and their need to recognize the signs of the tribulation and be prepared with salvation and serving faithfully when Christ comes in His kingdom.

In 25:1 we come to the parable of the ten virgins.³ **Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.** The word **then** is *τοτε* and connects this parable to the previous one. In other words, at the judgment when He returns **the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom.** The background of this picture is gathered from Jewish wedding customs. Constable says, “First, the parents arranged the marriage with the consent of the bride and groom. Second, the couple passed an engagement period of many months in which it would become clear, hopefully, that the bride was a virgin. Third, on the day of the wedding the groom would go to the bride’s house to claim his bride from her parents. Friends of his would accompany him. Fourth, the marriage ceremony would take place at the bride’s home. Fifth, the evening of the day of the wedding the groom would take his bride home. This involved a nighttime procession through the streets. Sixth, there would be a banquet that would often last as long as seven days. This often took place at the groom’s home. Seventh, the bride and groom would consummate their marriage at the groom’s home the night of the wedding ceremony.”⁴ The stage of the wedding this parable uses to make a comparison is the wedding party waiting outside the bridegroom’s home for the arrival of the new couple so they can enter into the banquet and celebrate. Constable said, “The scene in this parable is at night as the bride’s friends wait to welcome the couple and to enter the groom’s house where the banquet would begin shortly.”⁵ The number ten is simply a nice round number easily divisible in two groups. The fact they are virgins is incidental and they all had oil lamps.

In 25:2 Jesus divides the ten into two groups of five. **Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent.** The word **prudent** is the same word used in 24:45 where it is translated **sensible**. It is from the Greek word *φρονιμος* and means “being wise, having insight, being sensible.” **Five** of them were sensible, they thought ahead. The other **five were foolish**. The word **foolish** is from *μωρος* and means “stupid,” they didn’t think ahead. What made **five** of them sensible and **five** of them stupid? Verse 3, **For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.** Note that they all **took lamps** so there is no difference there. Note also that they all took oil in their lamps as verse 8 implies, “The foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ So even the **foolish** had oil in their lamps, it was just running out. That is not the difference. And I’d like to point out here that this shows that the oil is not symbolic of the Holy Spirit.⁶ That is what so many commentators claim and on occasion oil can symbolize the Holy Spirit. However, if that is true then verse 8 would be saying they had some of the Spirit but then they were running out of Him. I think that causes us to miss the point of the parable. The difference is not whether they had oil or not. They both had oil in their lamps. What is the only difference between the prudent and the foolish? The only difference is the prudent took additional oil with them. As verse 4 says the **prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.** The word **flask** is from the Greek word *αγγειον* and refers to “a container” separate from the

lamp. It held additional oil. These oil lamps were small and could only hold a small amount of oil and so the sensible thing would be to bring a container of additional oil. Why was this sensible? Because the exact amount of time it would take for the new couple to make their way through the streets to the groom's home was unknown. That is why verse 13 says the lesson is, "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour." No one knew the exact time the bridegroom and the new bride would arrive at the groom's home. They could only know the general time of their arrival, sometime during the night. So the sensible thing to do would be to bring a flask with additional oil just in case they tarried. This is, in fact, what happened and all ten virgins ran out of oil. But the difference is that half of them were stupid because they were unprepared for the arrival of the bridegroom with an additional flask of oil while the other half were prudent because they were prepared. This is the main idea of the parable; preparedness. Constable said, "Preparedness is what separated the wise from the foolish."⁷ Preparedness really is the only issue in this parable. All the rest of the speculation commentators make is just that, speculation, dangerous at best and harmful at worst.

25:5 says, **Now while the bridegroom was delaying.** And so he and the bride did tarry. Their procession through the streets took longer than all ten virgins expected. We're not told why and it doesn't really matter why. It's just a fact. And so the virgins **all got drowsy and began to sleep.** This again is not a difference among the ten. All ten **got drowsy and** fell asleep. Therefore, is the parable saying there is anything wrong with falling asleep? No. That is not the point of the parable. It is not speaking about alertness in that sense. However, what the next parable will do is pick up this period of delay and detail the importance of service during the delay. But here that is not the point and the fact they all fell asleep only shows that there was a delay and because of the delay they should have brought an additional container of oil, they should have been prepared.

In 25:6, **But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'** So at last **the bridegroom** is about to arrive. They were all asleep but it was time to go out and **meet him** properly. This word **meet** is *ἀπαντησις* and is commonly used of going out to meet a formal dignitary. In this case the honorable dignitary is the bridegroom and the ten virgins should be prepared to meet him properly. In verse 7, **Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps.** Note that all ten did this. They **all rose** and **trimmed their lamps.** This is not a difference. They were all trimming their wicks so that they would burn properly, a common procedure. Then in verse 8, **The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'** Here is the difference. The **foolish** were running low on oil, the prudent were not. And if the oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit then they were running low on the Holy Spirit. Of course, that is nonsense. It really doesn't mean anything when people say that and it doesn't really matter who is saying that, scholar or laymen, the oil is not the Holy Spirit. That is missing the point. The point here is they were stupid because they were unprepared. And their problem is now it is too late to get prepared. They should have been sensible and prepared beforehand like the prudent. In verse 9, **But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'** If the oil is the Holy Spirit, again, then the prudent are telling them to go buy some of the Holy Spirit. That is what Simon the Sorcerer tried to do.

That is something one cannot do. So in verse 10, **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.** Now here again is the main point. Five **were ready** when the **bridegroom came** and five were not. The word **ready** is from the Greek *ετοιμος*, and it is the same word used earlier in 24:44 where we said it means "prepared." "For this reason you also must be prepared; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will." Is that not exactly what happened to the ten virgins? The bridegroom came at an hour when they did not think he would? Yes, that is the exact point. But the difference is that five of them **were ready** for whenever he came and the other five were not! And as a consequence only the five who were prepared **went in with him to the wedding feast**. Someone then **shut...the door** so no others could enter.

In 25:11, **Later the other virgins also came**, presumably with some oil, **saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.'** **But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'** They could not get entrance to the **wedding feast** because they were not prepared when the time of entrance came. In verse 13 we have the whole lesson; **Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.** The word **alert** is from the Greek word *γρηγορευω*, the same word used in 24:42 where we said it means "be watchful." "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming." Is that not exactly what happened to the ten virgins? They knew the bridegroom was coming but they did not know exactly when and so they needed to be watchful. Yet they were not. Therefore, they were caught off guard when he delayed and while they were gone the bridegroom came and only those who were prepared welcomed him properly and entered into the wedding feast. At that point the door was shut.

What does all this mean? Well, it should be relatively clear. Who is the bridegroom? The bridegroom is Jesus. There is no mention of His bride. Some like to say that the Church is His bride and so they bring the Church in as the bride of Christ and say that the Church is raptured before the tribulation and married to Christ in heaven and here He is returning with the Church to earth to enter into the kingdom. This does fit nicely with the pre-tribulational scheme and it is true but it is not in the text and I wouldn't use that as an argument. Who are the ten virgins? The ten virgins are the whole house of Israel. When is this event? Immediately before Jesus returns in judgment to enter the kingdom. Who are the five stupid virgins? Israelites who are not prepared for His coming. Who are the five prudent virgins? Israelites who are prepared for His coming. Now it is interesting to note that all of them were expecting His coming. What does this signify? Well, in the first century all the Jews expected their Messiah to come. Most thought He would come with great power and glory and establish their kingdom regardless of their spiritual condition. They were not prepared. Others realized through the message repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand that they needed to be spiritually prepared in order to enter the kingdom. But they all expected the Messiah to come. Even today the Jews expect their Messiah to come and so is it any surprise that this parable pictures all Israel as expecting their Messiah. And is it any surprise that only some of them will be spiritually prepared? Toussaint said, "They know He is coming but are spiritually unprepared...Perhaps their spiritual condition will be analogous to the Jews at the Lord's first coming. With eyes

only for the physical benefits of the kingdom, the foolish Jews fail to prepare themselves spiritually for its coming.”⁸ So the point is that while all of the nation Israel will be expecting the Messiah’s coming only some of them will be spiritually prepared for it. The extra container of oil is indicative of being prepared. What exactly does it mean to be prepared? It means to have trusted in Jesus as the Messiah. It means nothing more or less than that. What does the period of delay represent? The period of time from when the first signs of the Tribulation begin until Jesus returns. There will be a period of time then, although it is relatively short, less than seven years. What is the significance of Jesus coming at midnight? Midnight was the same time of night at the Exodus that the angel of death went out through all Egypt and judged the firstborn. The fact that Jesus returns at midnight means that when He returns He will return in judgment. What does it mean that those without oil did not have time to prepare before He came once the announcement was made? It means that when Jesus returns it will be like a bolt of lightning so that there is no time to prepare at that time. Before they could get prepared He will already be there. At that time there will still be believing and unbelieving Jews on earth. The believing Jews are prepared and will enter into the wedding feast. What is the wedding feast? The wedding feast is the kingdom. It is the entirety of the kingdom. It is not just a portion of the kingdom as some people suggest. They want some Christians to be in the kingdom but miss the wedding feast. The only way to say that is to say that the wedding feast is only a part of the kingdom. But the problem is that the wedding feast is the whole kingdom. The significance of the door being shut at that time means that those who are not prepared before His arrival will not be saved and will not be allowed to enter the kingdom. This is just like the flood. When the door was shut no one else could enter to be delivered from the judgment. It will be the same way at that time. The door to the kingdom will be shut and only those who had already believed will be permitted to enter. What is the overall teaching? The teaching is that Jews in that time need to be prepared for Jesus’ coming before He arrives. The way to be prepared is to trust in Jesus for salvation. However, it’s more than that because no one living in that time can know the exact time of His coming and so they need to trust in Him as soon as possible, preferably early in the Tribulation. That way they can have time for faithful service which is the teaching of the next parable. The word “For” in verse 14 serving as a linkage between the two such that the first emphasizes spiritual preparation and the second emphasizes spiritual service. Both will be important.

¹ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 282.

² M’Neile, *St. Matthew*, 359, quoted by Toussaint, *Behold*, 283.

³ We know that the church is later likened to a virgin in that Paul wanted to present the church a pure, spotless virgin. However, there is no exegetical warrant for reading that in to this passage any more than there is warrant to read the virgin Mary into this passage.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 25:1.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 25:1.

⁶ Of course, we know that God will have poured out His Spirit on the believing remnant of Israel before this time (Zech 12), but that does not mean that the oil is the Spirit. If it is then the only connection is that when the Son of Man came only the believing remnant will have the Spirit.

⁷ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 25:2.

⁸ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 285.