

**The Parable of the Ten Virgins**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
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In Matthew 24-25, Jesus taught the Olivet Discourse, His final of five sermons in this Gospel. While at the Mount of Olives, He instructed His disciples about the signs that would precede His second coming and the events surrounding His return. After the seven-year tribulation period where the world will experience worse turmoil than has ever been seen either before or afterwards, the Lord will return immediately, on a day and an hour that no one knows, but everyone will see.

Jesus then told them a series of parables about the importance of being alert. His first parable was about the fig tree (24:32-35), which shows that aspects of the seven-year tribulation period will be observable and enable the people of that generation to know that the coming of the Lord is near.

Jesus' second and third parables, parable of the days of Noah and the parable of the watchful homeowner, were told in order to teach that the time of His coming cannot be known, since *"day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone"* (24:36). Just as the people of Noah's day did not anticipate the timing of the flood, so too the people of the generation that is alive when Christ returns will not anticipate the timing of it either. Just as a thief does not announce when he will break into a house, neither will God inform mankind of when the return of the Son of Man will be.

The fourth parable, the parable of the faithful and evil slave, expands on the teaching that the second coming of Jesus will be at a time when no one knows. The point of this parable is that the coming will be sooner than expected. *"But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,' and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (24:48-51).

Matthew 25:1-13 is the fifth in this series of parables teaching people *"do not know the day nor the hour"* of the return of the Lord. The parable of the ten virgins describes the plight of those who are unprepared because of a delay in arrival, in contrast to the previous parable where the evil slave is unprepared when his master arrives sooner than he expected.

## **The planning for the bridegroom (25:1)**

This parable teaches what the kingdom of heaven will be like when the Lord returns. Jesus uses the setting of a wedding feast in this parable in order to teach the principle of prudent preparation for the coming of Christ. It connects to the previous parable with the familiar connective “*then*” to further develop the concept of faithfulness in contrast to unfaithfulness in the context of the unexpected nature of His return.

The parables of Jesus used true to life stories that would be very familiar to His hearers in order to teach them a spiritual truth. The setting of the wedding feast was one of these familiar occasions, especially since weddings were much more of a community event in the first century than we experience today. Furthermore, there were unique cultural aspects of a Jewish wedding in Jesus’ day that shape this parable.

As in most cultures, marriages were arranged by the fathers and occurred at a younger age than in our day. This arrangement began the engagement period where plans for the betrothal ceremony were made. This ceremony was where the bride and groom would exchange vows among their family and their social network. Similar to our wedding ceremony, this would be where the couple would be considered married and the only way to separate would be to divorce, or to become widowed.

However, although married, the couple were still in the betrothal period until the wedding feast. During this time, the groom would prepare their place to live and establish his ability to support the household. This could take many months to finalize, and when ready, the betrothal would conclude with a marriage ceremony and wedding feast that could last up to a week in length.

This celebration began with the groom coming to the house of the bride with his groomsmen, where the bride would be waiting with her bridesmaids. Once he arrived there would be a marriage ceremony at the bride’s home, followed that night by a celebratory journey by the bride and groom along the streets to the home that had been prepared by the groom. This procession at night to the home of the groom would end with a banquet feast that would last for days for the family and friends from the community. At the end of this feast, the couple would be left alone in their new home, and then they would consummate their marriage. This would be the end of the feast and the couple would continue together in their new home.

This wedding day is where the parable of the ten virgins occurs. The ten virgins are the bridesmaids who appear in the parable to be waiting for the bridegroom to come. Whether they are waiting with the bride at her father's home to meet the bridegroom initially, or whether they are waiting at the new home of the bridegroom to bring the bride for the wedding feast is not entirely clear, but these ten bridesmaids each have a lamp, indicating that it was night time. Thus it is more likely that the setting is where they are waiting to welcome the bridegroom and bride into their new home to begin the wedding feast (cf. 25:10).

There is no real importance to the number of bridesmaids, other than it was a full group, and they are called virgins only in the sense that they were young women, as their virginity is of no significance in the parable.

### **The postponement of the bridegroom (25:2-5)**

The arrival of the bridegroom was delayed, and this postponement exposed the foolishness of half of the bridesmaids. The other five bridesmaids were described as "*prudent*," which is the same Greek word that was used by Jesus to describe the servant who was "*faithful*" in the previous parable (24:45). These five were prudent because they "*took oil in flasks along with their lamps*." In contrast, the foolish "*took no oil with them*," but they only took their lamps, along with the oil contained in them.

This failure to bring extra oil turned out to be pivotal because "*the bridegroom was delaying*." This delay caused the bridesmaids to become sleepy. There is no distinction between the bridesmaids regarding their sleepiness, but only whether they had prepared for a delay, since there was no exact time when the arrival might occur (24:42, 44).

This delay by the bridegroom obviously corresponds to the delay of Christ's second coming. The period of delay is how some will view the return of Christ during the tribulation period. Rather than the Lord coming sooner than expected as in the previous parable, here He is delayed and this exposes the lack of preparation of those who become weary in waiting for His deliverance of mankind in the kingdom of God.

Because this is a parable, there is no need to assign aspects such as the oil to represent the Holy Spirit. This parable simply describes the bridesmaids who were prudent and made provisions for their lamp because they knew that they did not know when the coming would exactly be. Some prepare and others do not.

### **The preparedness for the bridegroom (25:6-9)**

When the bridegroom finally arrived at midnight, the bridesmaids were alerted with a shout, *“Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”* That the parable only mentions the bridegroom and not the bride is because the bridegroom represents the coming of Jesus. This shout of the bridegroom’s coming awakened the bridesmaids, who then *“rose and trimmed their lamps.”*

These lamps (Greek LAMPAS) were either torches made of rags or oil lamps, used commonly in households. Either way, they required a regular supply of oil to keep them burning. Both torches and lamps required *“trimming.”* With torches, the edges of the rags that were burned would need to be trimmed. With lamps, the wick that was burned would need to be trimmed. The essence of the parable is not changed by the nature of the source of the light, since the issue at hand was the lack of oil on the part of the foolish virgins.

The foolish virgins lacked a sufficient supply of oil and *“said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’”* Apparently, they did not prepare for a long delay by bringing enough oil to maintain their light throughout the night. Because they assumed a more normal arrival time, when they realized their failure to prepare, they asked for oil from the other bridesmaids. *“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.’”*

There was no problem in this parable with the prudent virgins not being willing to share their oil, for there simply was not enough oil to go around. The problem was the lack of preparation by the foolish virgins. The proposed solution was to procure additional oil from people able to provide it, even at midnight.

### **The plea to the bridegroom (25:10-12)**

Whether the five foolish virgins were successful or not in finding oil is not mentioned, but they eventually returned only to find the wedding feast had begun inside and the door had been closed. The five prudent virgins were ready when the bridegroom arrived and *“went in with him to the wedding feast.”* The foolish virgins had another dilemma in that they were now shut out of the wedding feast that they had planned to attend.

This led them to plead to the bridegroom to open the door for them. But in spite of their urgent plea, he refused, *“Truly I say to you, I do not know you.”*

It may be surprising to think that the bridegroom would not know half of the bridal party, but this is a parable for the purpose of comparison with the kingdom of heaven (25:1). The statement *“I do not know you”* is reminiscent of Jesus' words to those who merely call Him *“Lord, Lord”* but who do not do the will of His Father in heaven, where He will tell them *“I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS”* (Matthew 7:21-23).

Clearly the foolish virgins represented those who would not enter the kingdom of heaven at the time of the coming of Christ, who is represented by the bridegroom in this parable. Likewise, the prudent virgins represented those who would enter into the kingdom of heaven. We can see many truths of salvation in the kingdom expressed in this parable:

1. Those left out of the kingdom will lack a relationship with Jesus

A personal knowledge of Jesus is required to enter into the kingdom. To simply participate with people who have a personal relationship with Jesus is inadequate. To be actively involved in a fellowship of believers is a part of what true followers of Jesus do, but it does not equal true belief. This truth about the kingdom of heaven was taught by Jesus in the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:36-43.

2. Faith in Jesus involves more than believing that He will return

Many people today will say that they believe that Jesus is coming again. Belief about certain doctrines does not necessarily mean a person has true saving faith. Just as the foolish virgins looked for the coming of the bridegroom but they did not act upon it in preparation for his return, so too those who simply think that Jesus will return but do nothing to prepare adequately for it, demonstrate their lack of true faith.

3. There will be a great sense of loss by unbelievers at the coming of Christ

This sudden realization of the plight of unbelievers who are separated from God for eternity is seen in Jesus' words from earlier in His ministry in Luke 13:25-27, *“Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets’; and He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME.”*

4. True believers are prepared for Christ's return

In this parable, Jesus does not emphasize alertness, but preparation for His return. In contrast to unbelievers, the believers prepare for the Lord by exercising their faith in trusting Him with their lives. As faithful slaves, they do His will (Matthew 24:45-46). As Jesus said, *"For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will."* (Matthew 24:44).

5. Unbelievers are not prepared for Christ's return

This was taught in Matthew 24:37-39, when Jesus compared the people of Noah's day with the people at the end times, *"For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be."* Unbelievers simply are not concerned about the gravity of being prepared when God's judgment arrives at a time when they do not expect.

6. Eternal life in God's kingdom cannot be transferred to others

Just as the prudent virgins could not share their oil and the foolish virgins were locked out of the wedding feast, each person's faith is theirs alone. Each one of us must respond to the Lord and if we fail to act upon what is true, judgment will come. No one else can deliver us from the judgment upon our unbelief, for *"it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment"* (Hebrews 9:27). We each will stand before God, *"But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load"* (Galatians 6:4-5).

**The purpose of the parable (25:13)**

This parable concludes with the point that Jesus wanted His disciples to learn, *"Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour."* Four times in the previous chapter Jesus made this same point (24:36, 42, 44, 50). To be alert for His coming is to be prepared, ready at all times for His return. This means living our life of faith in service to Him, doing His will. This is the very thing that His children will have the natural inclination to do, as new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

## Conclusion

The parable of the ten virgins is the fifth in a series of parables by Jesus to teach that no one will know the day and hour of His return, and therefore people must be alert and ready. This parable depicts the consequences of being unprepared if this return occurs later than expected. Those unprepared in the end times will be excluded from the kingdom of God.

To “*be on the alert*” then is to be ready and prepared, whether the Lord’s return is soon or delayed. Just as no one knows when the Lord will come with His kingdom, no one knows when He will come for His church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18). How then are we to ensure that we are prepared for the Lord’s return?

The reason the Lord chose not to reveal the timing of His return is because He sought to build our faith. Trusting in Him requires us to balance the nearness of His return, which is imminent, with the need to plan if there is a delay. Therefore, we are to be always ready, yet we are also to plan for not only our future in eternity, but also our future if the Lord tarries.

This is why it will look as if those who have planned for the Lord’s return are engaged in the very same endeavors as those who have not planned. “*Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left*” (Matthew 24:40-41).

It is prudent for us to use our remaining time on earth prudently, serving the Lord’s will, rather than serving ourselves. “*Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is*” (Ephesians 5:15-17).

To avoid selfishness and to serve the Lord’s interests will ensure we are His children, ready for His return. “*Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man*” (Luke 21:34-36).