

Parable of the Ten Virgins
Matthew 25:1-13
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Be alert and watchful for the return of the Lord
Prepare for the possibility of a long delay in the return of the bridegroom

Like the Parable from the Fig Tree, this parable instructs us to be watchful and on the alert for Jesus' coming. However unlike the Fig Tree, the Parable of the Ten Virgins teaches us to be prepared for the possibility of a long delay in the return of the bridegroom. Both parables tell us that we will not know in advance the day nor the hour of His return.

Although this parable occurs only in Matthew, there are three parables in which Jesus exhorts us to be ready and watchful for His return:

1. Parable from the Fig Tree: Matthew 24:32-42
2. Parable of the Ten Virgins: Matthew 25: 1-13
3. Parable of the Alert Slaves: Luke 12:35-48 and Matthew 24: 42-51.

The Parable of Ten Virgins, Matthew 25:1-13

1 Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. 3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no



Photo by Gavin Finley, MD
as it appears in his article,
"The End-Time Revival,"
endtimepilgrim.org

oil with them, 4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. 5 Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." 7 Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the prudent, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 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." 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. 11 Later the other virgins also came, saying, "Lord, lord, open up for us." 12 But he answered, "Truly I say to

you, I do not know you.” 13 Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.¹

The fundamental message of the parable



Once again Jesus is teaching us to be alert and ready for we do not know the day of His return. But something new is added in this parable that does not appear elsewhere. A critical part of being ready is to be prepared for the possibility of a long delay in Jesus’ return.

Starting with the conclusion

In concluding the parable (verse 13) Jesus tells us, “Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.” If we focus on the conclusion first, having those words firmly fixed in our minds, will help avoid problems with unwinding the parable later on. The parable is indeed a rich and complex one. Add to that the eschatological theme of the return of the bridegroom, and we may be easily distracted with interpretations that are not the main point.

What is the main point of the parable?

Anticipating a delay

A simplified, but not simplistic view is this: some are prepared for the Lord’s return and some are not. But the parable really turns on the fact that those who are anticipating the return of the bridegroom, the ten virgins, are enduring a long delay in his coming. The parable does not reveal any reason for the delay in his return, only saying, “Now while the bridegroom was delaying . . .” It is on this key point—the delay of the bridegroom’s coming—that a very important distinction is revealed to exist between the two groups of virgins: Five had anticipated a delay and were carrying extra oil along with them in flasks. But five of their companions assumed the bridegroom would come *when they expected him to come*, and were not ready for a delay. They had only the oil in the lamp itself, and had no extra in a separate flask.

A closer look

The Bridegroom

The bridegroom is Jesus. This is an eschatological parable. It is about His return. Fortunately, only a few teachers think otherwise. But to be thorough on the point, anyone in doubt may take note of the fact that John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the bridegroom, and even the Lord Himself makes personal reference to His status as bridegroom:

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease.
John 3:29-30.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture reference are to the New American Standard Bible, Updated version, published by the Lockman Foundation.

And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” Matthew 9:15.

The meaning of oil

Much has been made of what the oil means. Some say that the oil is indicative of good works. We cannot enter into the wedding feast without good works to go with our faith. I would find tremendous problems with this view as the five foolish virgins are refused entry, even when they return with the oil of good works, and have the terror of hearing the bridegroom say, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.” Surely this view is untenable. [Photo: Oil lamp and flask set as advertised on biblelandshop.net.]



Others assert that the oil represents the Holy Spirit. After all, oil is rather consistently presented in scripture as an emblem for the Holy Spirit. There are fewer problems with this view, although it seems logical that anyone with the oil of the Spirit to any degree or in any quantity is therefore, by definition, saved. An unsaved person cannot receive the Spirit at all.

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. John 14:16-17.

Remember also that “their lamps were going out,” (not “gone out” as erroneously translated in the KJV). A flickering lamp is lamentable, but it is still a lamp alight and may be salvaged with more oil. And yet when the five unwise virgins return after going to the dealer and acquiring more oil they are refused entry. Again, they hear the bridegroom say, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.” If Jesus the Bridegroom does not know a person, that person cannot, by definition, be saved.

Therefore the oil equals Holy Spirit equation presents a true Gordian Knot. One cannot be saved and hear the Lord say, “I do not know you,” and one cannot have received the Holy Spirit without being saved. Here is a dilemma indeed.

Lack of oil as a lack of preparation

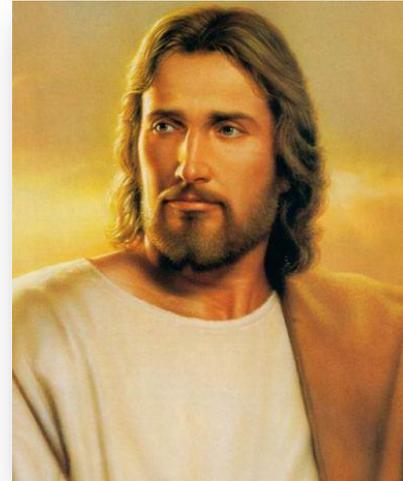
A better solution can be derived if we remember to start with the conclusion—this is a parable about preparation, especially in anticipating a long delay. We can let the oil be a sign of that preparation and do no damage to either the parable, nor to other scripture.

Therefore the lack of oil on the part of the foolish is not lack of good works or the Holy Spirit but a lack of preparation for a delay. Keeping in mind that the entire parable hinges on the delay of the bridegroom we find a simple statement illustrated in the lack of oil: The foolish did not anticipate the eventuality of a delay on the part of the bridegroom but the wise did.

The 10 virgins

Not unlike the problem of oil and what it represents, there are various views of the ten virgins themselves.

In one view, the ten virgins are a class representing the Bride of Christ herself, rather than bridesmaids. However, given what we know of wedding traditions of the day, it would not be likely for the Lord to speak of a man marrying ten virgins. The gentiles of His day certainly practiced polygamy, but not Jews. Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in regard to marriage was not aimed at polygamy but of their practice of serial marriage. The Pharisees asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" Matthew 19:3. Jesus' response upheld what God intended from the beginning: One man; one woman. All of this to say that it is certainly unwieldy to assume the ten virgins represent the Bride of Christ. Besides, then we have a divided bride class when five are refused entry into the wedding feast.



In a second view, the ten virgins are all Christians. The five wise virgins are the Bride of Christ but the five foolish virgins are, while still believers, are not admitted to the wedding feast and endure the great tribulation period on earth. This view faces the same dilemma as the foolish virgins having some but not enough oil. How can they be believers and yet hear the Lord say, "I do not know you"?

But again, if we focus on the message of the parable, the interpretation of who these virgins represent becomes more tightly focused. Let us assume that all ten virgins are attendants of the bride or bride's maids, waiting for the bridegroom to return and the wedding feast to begin. This would be consistent with what we know of weddings of Jesus' day: There is a procession to the home of the bride after dark. The bridegroom and his companions come for bride who is with her companions waiting in the house. Once the procession arrives at the bride's house, she and her companions leave with the bridegroom and join those in the procession to the wedding feast.

But in the parable a wrinkle is presented: The bridegroom delays his coming. As they wait a difference in the readiness of the ten virgins is exposed. Before we look at that difference it is good to observe the similarities: They all have lamps and at least some oil. They all expect to meet the bridegroom when he comes and all are waiting for him. They all get drowsy and begin to sleep, and they are all awakened by the midnight cry. So far they are equal.

What the ten virgins do not have in common is extra oil. The wise virgins, anticipating the possibility of a delay, have brought extra oil with them in flasks. Thus in taking the view of

virgins as bridesmaids, five properly prepared and five not prepared the parable refocuses on preparation for the Lord's return and not who is a virgin and what is the significance of oil.

The wise are unable to help the foolish

The foresight of preparation by the wise virgins, (that is those who properly prepared for the coming of the Lord), is not transferrable to others. Their preparedness cannot be shared. Those expecting the Lord's return were either prepared or not. At the very moment of the bridegroom's arrival, the foolish finally saw the need of being properly prepared, but it was too late. By the time they returned with extra oil, the door had already been shut.

Good intentions are not enough

Certainly there is a stark message in this parable for our times. One is either prepared for the return of the Lord, including anticipating the possibility of delay or he is not. If one is not prepared, let him prepare. If he is prepared, let him keep alert and watchful. There is no excuse for not being ready. Our good intentions are not enough. Knowing that the Lord will return is not enough. Good intentions must be converted into good preparations.

The wedding feast proceeds without the foolish virgins

Keeping in mind that the parable is about preparation and readiness, it is easy to see that those who are not ready and prepared will be left behind. When the Lord returns we will find people who started out waiting for His coming, but in the end were unprepared. We notice a similar theme in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 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.'"

Notice that there is a point at which the last minute scurry to prepare is simply too late. This can be seen in the parable in this sentence, "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 consequences of not being ready are immense. The bridegroom in the parable says, "I do not know you," when they come and knock. The parable is told to alert us to the need to be ready, watchful and prepared. No one knows when the Lord Jesus will return. We can expect anything from immediacy to lengthy delays. Being spiritually ready is the key. And as the Lord Himself concludes:

Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

