

**Parable of the Ten Virgins**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**  
**ABC 8/23/20**

How many of you have ever run out of gas? Besides flat tires, dead batteries, & keys locked in the vehicle, running out of gas ranks right up there as why people call AAA. One might understand this happening a generation ago, when gas gauges weren't always accurate & all the warning lights of our day were non-existent. But now we have warning messages that our fuel is running low & telling us many miles we have left. One could say that those who run out of fuel are without excuse. Why does it still happen as frequently now as it once did? In our text, it isn't gas they're running out of, but olive oil, the fuel burned lamps of Jesus' day.<sup>1</sup> It's been a few weeks since we've been in the parables of Jesus. The last 2 we looked at are found at the end of Mt 24, the parables of the head of the house (42-44) & the 2 servants (45-51). The 1<sup>st</sup> concludes with these words: **44**

The parable of the 2 servants warns against those who think the master will be gone longer than he actually will be & includes these words: **48-50**

Our parable this morning balances this with a warning not to assume the Lord's returning earlier than He is. This time a main figure stays away longer than expected. The problem here isn't the quick return of the master but his delay. Half of the bridesmaids are unprepared for the length of time they'll have to wait for the bridegroom to arrive.<sup>2</sup> All 3 of these parables emphasize neither delay nor nearness but good stewardship for whatever length of time Jesus tarries. The next 2 parables in Mt 25, the parables of the talents & of the sheep & the goats, make this crystal clear.<sup>3</sup> If the problem facing the wicked servant was the surprisingly quick return of his master, then the opposite problem faces the bridesmaids in our passage today.<sup>4</sup> All 3 of these parables address the timing of Christ's return. He comes unexpectedly in the 1<sup>st</sup> (24:42-44). He returns surprisingly early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> (24:45-51). & He's delayed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> (25:1-13),<sup>5</sup> which is our focus this morning. What's all this mean for us? We must always be ready. As I've mentioned, it seems to me that in Mt 24-

<sup>1</sup> Illustration from Robert Deffinbaugh, <https://bible.org/print/book/export/html/3041>

<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg, [Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation](#), p 195

<sup>3</sup> Craig Blomberg, [Interpreting the Parables](#), p 147

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 238

<sup>5</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p 718

25 Jesus is referring to the time between the rapture of the church & His return at the end of the tribulation when He'll usher in His millennial kingdom. Although this appears to be given for those alive during the tribulation, the same attitudes should be in us as we look forward to His coming in the clouds to take up His bride, the church. **24:42-5:1-13**

Being ready for Christ's return means we mustn't be caught off guard whether He comes early or late. Of course, we do believe the return of Christ is fast approaching. The Bible clearly says, **it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed** (Rom 13:11). **The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment & sober *spirit* for the purpose of prayer** (1 Pt 4:7). Nothing stands in the way of the Lord's return. It could be at any time. Therefore, it's vital that we be ready if He should return today. But our ignorance about the timing of Christ's return has another implication as well: we must remain patient, diligent, & faithful no matter how long He may delay His return. We must be ready, whether He returns right away or waits another 1,000 years. & while we wait, we must stay faithful to our responsibilities. That's what readiness looks like. It's not the escapism of those who drop out & sit idly waiting for Him. In order to illustrate why we must be prepared in case His coming is delayed, Jesus tells this parable about **ten virgins**. These **virgins** are bridesmaids in a wedding. But the wedding is troubled with a set of problems no bride would ever want. It's getting late & the groom hasn't arrived & the bridesmaids have all fallen asleep. When he does come,  $\frac{1}{2}$  the bridesmaids are out of oil & can't light their lamps. Without **lamps** (or *torches*, translated both ways) they can't perform the job they're given. Of the bridesmaids,  $\frac{1}{2}$  were ready &  $\frac{1}{2}$  weren't. 5 were prepared but 5 were not. This parable stresses the distinction between those who are outwardly part of Jesus' kingdom & those who are truly in it. Some are Christians in name only & others truly believe in Him & are always ready.

While a midnight wedding with the very late arrival of the bridegroom sounds bizarre to us, this wouldn't have sounded odd or far-fetched to the disciples. This parable describes a portion of a typical Jewish wedding ceremony. The process of engagement & marriage in 1<sup>st</sup>-century Judaism had 3 phases. The 1<sup>st</sup> was the promise of marriage, much like an engagement today, & was usually

formalized by a contract. This arrangement was made between the parents & sealed with a payment made by the bridegroom's father to the bride's father. Phase two was betrothal. This began with the public exchange of vows & gifts between the couple. A promised couple were legally committed to marry one another & the union couldn't be broken except by divorce (Mt 1:19). But the marriage wasn't consummated until after phase three, the wedding feast. This might come as late as a year later. It marked the completion of the marriage with a large celebration, often lasting several days. Only after the wedding banquet did the couple live together.<sup>6</sup> This festivity began with the groom's coming with his groomsmen to the bride's house, where her bridesmaids were waiting with her. Together the bride & groom & their attendants would parade through the streets proclaiming that the wedding feast was about to begin. The procession was generally begun at night & lamps or torches were used by the wedding party to light the way & draw attention. At the end of the feast period, a close friend of the groom would take the hand of the bride & place it in the hand of the groom & the couple would be left alone together. The marriage would be consummated & the couple would now live together. It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the marriage rite that Jesus used for this parable. Again, don't over complicated Jesus' parables. Some say the 5 women in each category stand for the 5 senses, used either for good or for evil; the sleep of the 10, for death; & the sellers of oil, for the poor who imparted merit to those who gave them alms.<sup>7</sup> That's all nonsense!

**1. The Ten Virgins (1-5) Then (1)** refers to the time of Christ's unexpected appearing in power & glory, about which He's been speaking. At that time, He said, spiritual readiness for entrance into **the kingdom of heaven will be comparable** to the alertness of these **virgins** who served as bridesmaids at the wedding. The numbers are incidental. What's crucial is how some were foolish & others were wise. All 10 had a job to do. They were to be ready to welcome the groom with lights when he comes. That was their job, to be ready (10). But 5 of them didn't take their calling seriously & they neglected to be ready when the groom arrived. They had lamps but no oil, candles without

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<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, *Parables*, pp 130-131

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, vol 1, pt 3, pp 843-51

wicks, torches without fire, or light bulbs without electricity. They had an outward form of religion but no internal power. As with all of Jesus' parables, the message of this one is simple. It's meant to illustrate truths He's been teaching; that He's coming again, that He'll judge sinners & reward the righteous, that people must be ready, & that His coming will be unexpected. The central truth is that once He's arrived, there will be no 2<sup>nd</sup> chance & the opportunity for salvation will be gone forever. Every detail of the story doesn't carry meaning. The very fact that details such as the bride's identity & the place where the virgins slept aren't mentioned has no bearing on the point Jesus was making. For His purpose, the story was clear & complete. His parable describes day one of the wedding feast. The bridegroom's arrival would signal the start of the festivities & the bridesmaids would come out to meet him & escort him through the streets of the village with oil-fueled lamps or torches. As MacArthur says,

*In the context of Jesus' teaching about His return & of the parable's illustrating the coming of His kingdom, **the bridegroom** is obviously Christ Himself. The **ten virgins** are professed believers in Him, & the **lamps**, or torches, symbolize their outward identity with His church. The torches also represent expectation of His imminent return, the preparation & readiness of the bridesmaids **to meet the divine bridegroom** when He comes to gather them for His wedding feast.<sup>8</sup>*

The virgins represent professing disciples of Christ who claim to love the prospect of His appearing & who demonstrate an outward readiness for entrance into His kingdom. In appearance all 10 were indistinguishable. They were all dressed appropriately & all had the required lamp to carry in the wedding procession. But they weren't all alike because they weren't all prepared, which is the point of the parable. What separates the foolish from the wise is the failure of the foolish bridesmaids to face the possibility that the bridegroom may come later than expected. The wise are ready before the groom arrives.

**A. Foolish Virgins** The evidence that 5 of the bridesmaids were unprepared despite their outward appearance was the fact that **they took no oil with them** (3). They carried lamps that looked like those of the others, but they had nothing to burn in them, nothing that would give light. A torch without fuel is obviously worthless just as a flashlight without batteries is worthless. But a profession of faith in Jesus without a saving relationship with Him is infinitely more worthless. The

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<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew*, electronic edition

foolish virgins had no oil. The problem wasn't that they slept when the groom's arrival was delayed but that they weren't ready when he did come. They expected him to come on their schedule, not his.

**B. Prudent Virgins** The prudent bridesmaids, however, **took oil in flasks along with their lamps** (4). 5 were without any light. They had a form of godliness but no spiritual life because they didn't truly belong to God (2 Tim 3:5). They were committed to Jesus religiously, intellectually, socially, & probably emotionally. But they weren't committed to Him because their hearts hadn't been regenerated by His saving grace. They had the appearance of faith, but it was dead (Js 2:17). They were in darkness, not light. The warning Jesus gives in this parable is repeated over & over in the gospels. He warns that professed believers are like wheat & tares; some are genuine & some are false. They are compared to various kinds of soils, some of which give some evidence of productivity but only one of which receives the seed of the gospel & allows it to take root & grow. It wasn't a popular message in Jesus' day & it isn't a popular message today. But it's still true.

The statement that **the bridegroom was delaying** (5) reinforces Jesus' teaching that His return will be unexpected. It isn't delayed from the divine perspective but from our human perspective. Again, the main thrust of this parable, like the entire discourse, is directed to the generation who will be living during the Tribulation (Mt 24:34). Even the short period of time that elapses between the signs of His coming & His actual appearance will cause some people to think the Lord is **delaying** His return. That idea is supported by the bridesmaids' becoming **drowsy** & falling **to sleep** (5). They were expecting the bridegroom's coming & were gathered together waiting for Him, all seeming to be prepared. There's no indication here that **sleep** represents laziness or faithlessness. Even the **prudent virgins** fell asleep, illustrating that no one, not even faithful saints, will know exactly when Christ will appear. Note that it isn't foolish to sleep. All 10 slept. This isn't sleeping on the job of life because sleeping is part of the job. What sleeping signifies in this parable is simply the ordinary activities of life. We aren't called to go up on a mountain & gaze idly into the sky as we wait for Jesus. We're called to do our work. Then rest. Then do some more work. Then rest again. All 10 slept because sleep is part of the normal rhythm of life that we should follow as we work & rest &

wait for Jesus.<sup>9</sup> In one sense, life should go on as usual for the believer who eagerly anticipates the Lord's return. Readiness for His coming is shown by being about His business with faithful dedication. Even the most passionate service of the Lord doesn't exclude such normal activities as eating, drinking, & sleeping (Mt 24:40–41). It isn't their common activities that distinguish the prepared from the unprepared when the Lord returns, but the supernatural, internal participation in the life of God that only believers possess. When He appears at His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, the difference will be clear. The lamps of believers will shine brightly but those of unbelievers won't burn at all.

**2. The Bridegroom** (6-12) At **midnight** (6) most people are typically deep in sleep, just as the bridesmaids were. The bridegroom's arrival then emphasizes the unexpectedness of Christ's return. Although the groom's arrival at midnight has no deep meaning here, it's interesting that the Israelites began their journey out of Egypt at midnight (Ex 12:29) & rabbinical tradition held that the Messiah would come to earth at that hour. All the bridesmaids, the **foolish** & the wise, knew the groom would be coming soon & they were gathered waiting for Him. They were aware the final festivities were about to begin. But they didn't know exactly when he'd arrive until they were awakened with the **shout, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him"** (6). The bridegroom was late. We're not told the reason for the delay, so it must not be important to the story. It clearly wasn't because he was apathetic about the wedding or indifferent toward his bride because when he arrives he wasn't willing to wait to start the ceremony. The guests apparently had stayed too, despite the delay. All was ready except for the 5 foolish females who had no oil. As soon as the bridegroom's presence was announced, **all those virgins rose, & trimmed their lamps** (7). Trimming the **lamps**, or torches, probably amounted to cutting off ragged edges of the cloth & saturating the torch with oil or trimming the wick & adding oil to the lamp.

**A. Foolish Virgins** At that moment **the foolish** ladies realized their problem: they had no oil. It wasn't that they'd been unaware of their lack of oil but that they didn't care enough about it to bring extra for the bridegroom's arrival. No reason is given for their negligence, no doubt because the reason doesn't matter. Because they had ample warning that he was coming & had plenty of time to be

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<sup>9</sup> John Piper, [www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-christ-the-bridegroom-past-and-future](http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-christ-the-bridegroom-past-and-future)

totally prepared for his arrival, nothing could excuse their failure. Perhaps they thought they could quickly run down to the oil-stop shop anytime they wanted & buy what they needed in plenty of time. Or maybe they thought they could borrow oil, which is what they tried. When **the foolish said to the prudent, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out," ... the prudent answered, saying, "No, there will not be enough for us & you too; go instead to the dealers & buy some for yourselves"** (8-9). But by then it was too late. Maybe you think there'd be a little more cooperation between bridesmaids. But the parable is about being spiritually ready, not a lesson on the golden rule. Spiritual readiness isn't something that can be transferred from one to another. Saving grace isn't transferable. No one can prepare for someone else. No one can get by on another's faith. This helps us understand why the wise women refused to give their oil to the foolish women. The story isn't about sharing but to reveal that when Christ returns, each person must stand on his own. Your father's faith won't save you. Your wife's faith won't save you. You won't be saved by the spiritual life of your son or daughter. The question will be, "Where do *you* stand? Are *you* alive in Christ? Are *you* ready?" When the Lord appears, many professed Christians will frantically realize their lack of spiritual life. They won't have followed Paul's advice when he says, **Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?** (2 Cor 13:5). They'll be self-deceived, perhaps believing that mere association with the things & the people of God has made them a part of Christ's true church. Some may think being born into a Christian family will make them a member of God's family. We know that many will be trusting in their good works, saying to Christ, **on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, & in Your name cast out demons, & in Your name perform many miracles?' & then He will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'** (Mt 7:22–23). The foolish virgins weren't ready to meet the groom.

**B. The Prudent Virgins** Again, the point of the **prudent** bridesmaids' response to those asking for oil wasn't that they were selfish but that they were helpless to provide oil for their foolish friends. Their own oil was **not ... enough** to share with anyone else; it was necessary that each **buy** her own (9). Just as one person cannot transfer part of his physical life to another person, neither can one

share spiritual life with another. Like physical life, spiritual life is a direct, individual gift from God & is nontransferable. The saved can't become saviors of others. Those who receive grace can't give grace to others. When the call to the judgment seat of God comes to an unbeliever, whether at death or at the Lord's return, the prayers of all the saints in heaven & on earth can do him absolutely no good at all. It will be too late. After that time there's no 2<sup>nd</sup> chance, no purgatory, & no hope. Lost opportunities can't be regained. The foolish women set out to buy oil, but the bridegroom came, & they were too late. So it will be when Christ returns. Those who are ready will be taken in to the marriage feast & those who aren't ready will be shut out. Don't make the mistake of saying you'll turn to Jesus later thinking there'll be time for you to do that. You don't know that. Today may be the last time you'll hear the gospel. & even if it isn't, it won't be easier for you to turn to God later. In fact, just the opposite. The fact that you've rejected the free offer of God's grace now will harden you so you'll find it more difficult to repent later. Millions who once heard the gospel & postponed a decision have since perished in their sins. The only wise thing is to come to Jesus now. The Bible says, **now is THE ACCEPTABLE TIME, behold, now is THE DAY OF SALVATION** (2 Cor 6:2). Of course, salvation can't be bought. The buying of oil from **the dealers** refers simply to securing salvation from its only source, God Himself. It's bought only in the sense that Isaiah used when he wrote, **Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; & you who have no money come, buy & eat. Come, buy wine & milk without money & without cost** (55:1). The same idea is used by Jesus in His parables of the treasure found in a field & of the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44–46). In both cases, the discoverer sold everything he had in order to obtain that which was valued above all else. In that sense, the price for salvation is the entire abandonment of one's own merit, which has no value in itself & must be surrendered because it's a barrier to God's grace.

It was thoughtless of the 5 foolish ladies not to bring extra oil & be ready for the groom's arrival. Having a burning lamp was their one duty. Their irresponsibility was similar to the negligence of the man in Mt 22:11–14 who showed up at a wedding without being dressed for the occasion. It was a thoughtless insult to the bridegroom. As soon as they heard the bridegroom was coming, the irresponsible girls went out to try to buy oil. **10**



**And the door was shut.** There's an awful finality about those words. It means the *door* was shut & locked & wouldn't be opened again. Those on the inside were safely in; those on the outside could never get in no matter how hard they tried. There is a *door* that leads to heaven. It's the *door* of God's grace, held open by the bloody cross, the death of Jesus Christ in your place. For 2,000 years that *door* has been open to the entire world & is still open today. Anyone, anywhere, anytime can go in that door & find new life, salvation, forgiveness, freedom, & abundant & eternal life. But one day it will be too late & the door will be shut. Those are terrifying words. They had lamps. They had religion. Others looked at them & assumed they had true life & faith. But all they had was an empty lamp. & now, they're about to face One who sees right through them, & says, **Truly, I say to you, I do not know you** (12). You don't want to hear those words. Many will but you don't have to. 5 weren't ready for his arrival so they were excluded from the wedding feast. They ought to have been prepared for the groom's possible delay. When they finally returned & begged to be admitted to the feast, the bridegroom was firm. They'd botched their one duty as bridesmaids & were now a disruption to the celebration. The bridegroom's reply to them is chilling: **Truly, I say to you, I do not know you** (12). That's an echo of what Jesus will say to the religious hypocrites in the final judgment: **I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!** (Mt 7:23). It's reminiscent of His words in Lk 13:24–28:

**Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter & will not be able. When once the Master of the house has risen up & shut the door, & you begin to stand outside & knock at the door, saying, "Lord, Lord, open for us," & He will answer & say to you, "I do not know you, where you are from," then you will begin to say, "We ate & drank in Your presence, & You taught in our streets." But He will say, "I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity." There will be weeping & gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham & Isaac & Jacob & all the prophets in the kingdom of God, & yourselves thrust out.**

The point of this parable is simple: Christ is coming. He may arrive later than we expect & we must be prepared for that. That means remaining faithful & ready for Him no matter how late He is. In fact, as time passes & His arrival grows closer, the need for watchfulness is greater, not less. The only time we can prepare for Him is now, because His sudden arrival will signal the end of all such opportunity. Those not ready for Him when He arrives will be completely & permanently shut out of the wedding feast forever. The foolish virgins knew the bridegroom was going to get married,

they knew he'd come to the banquet, & they knew they needed oil for their lamps. It's not a matter of a lack of information or having the wrong information. All 10 started with the same facts. The 5 foolish virgins had everything they needed to know & still they weren't ready!

What does all this mean? People who build their lives on any other foundation than Jesus Christ are doomed to destruction. They don't have the necessary grace, imputed righteousness, resident holiness of God's Spirit, or a transformed character to counter the destructiveness of sin, whose ultimate consequence is death. In short, they have no spiritual life & therefore no eternal hope. They may feel good about Jesus, admire His teachings, & enjoy the fellowship of His people. They may look prepared for His coming as do true believers, having torches like the rest, but they have no oil with which to light them. **11**

The tragedy is that there was then no more opportunity **to make the purchase** & be accepted into the wedding feast. Were they able to buy more oil? Jesus doesn't say. It doesn't matter. They had missed their opportunity. When the foolish virgins returned & **came saying, "Lord, lord, open up for us,"** the bridegroom **answered, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you"** (11-12). Those 5 were fake attendants who'd never belonged to the wedding party but had managed to dress & act like true bridesmaids. Now the pretense was over & their sinful, foolish character was exposed. What a tragedy. It will be a moment of sheer terror when unbelievers face a holy God & realize with absolute certainty they are eternally lost.

**3. The Warning** Although this parable illustrates the time of Christ's 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, its truths apply to an unbeliever's facing God at death in any age. At that moment the opportunity for salvation will be past & all hope gone forever. Jesus concludes this parable with another warning, one which He's given before. **13**

For the 5<sup>th</sup> time in this discourse (24:36, 42, 44, 50) Jesus called on those who will be alive during the last days of the Tribulation to be **alert**, because they won't **know the day nor the hour** of His appearing. They would know its nearness by the signs, but the exact **day** & the exact **hour** they would not & could not know. **Be on the alert** or **watch** doesn't mean looking out the window. It means to be spiritually awake. Use all the means God has given you to know & love & trust Him.

Jesus came to redeem a people to Himself at the price of His own death. If we're part of that people by faith in Jesus, He will welcome us to His wedding supper. What does it mean to be ready? Charles H. Spurgeon saw it as an inner change brought about by regeneration or new birth. He wrote,

*A great change has to be wrought in you, far beyond any power of yours to accomplish, ere you can go in with Christ to the marriage. You must, first of all, be renewed in your nature, or you will not be ready. You must be washed from your sins, or you will not be ready. You must be justified in Christ's righteousness, & you must put on his wedding dress, or else you will not be ready. You must be reconciled to God, you must be made like to God, or you will not be ready. Or, to come to the parable before us, you must have a lamp, & that lamp must be fed with heavenly oil, & it must continue to burn brightly, or else you will not be ready. No child of darkness can go into that place of light. You must be brought out of nature's darkness into God's marvelous light, or else you will never be ready to go in with Christ to the marriage, & to be forever with him.<sup>10</sup>*

Which brings us back to the pressing question: Are you ready? I don't ask, *Have you responded to a gospel invitation? Have you joined a church? Or do you believe in Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> coming?* I ask, *Have you been born again? Have you believed on Jesus as your Savior from sin? Are you living for Jesus now? Are you truly ready, or are you among those who only seem to be prepared?*<sup>11</sup> Jesus will come without warning either at the end of time or on the day of your death, which, for every one of us, is much the same thing. Going to church is good; coming to Christ is better. Being baptized is good; being born again is better. Giving money is good; giving your heart to Jesus is better. Being religious is good; knowing Christ as Savior & Lord is better. Only true saving faith makes you a member of the bridal party of those know the Lord. Salvation is always a personal affair. You can't go to heaven by hanging onto someone's coattails. You must believe in Jesus on your own, for yourself, not relying on the faith of those around you. Today the door of salvation is wide open to one & all. When you die, the door will close. When Christ returns the door will close. No one knows what tomorrow may bring. Perhaps you'll live another 20 years or 20 months or 20 days or 20 minutes. Who knows? Don't say, *Someday I'll come to Christ*. Come now. Don't wait for *someday*. Don't say, *I'll repent later*. If you wait, you may harden your heart & never come at all. Many will miss heaven & it will be no one's fault but their own. You won't be able to blame your parents, friends, spouse, or those hypocrites at church. If you miss heaven & wonder why, look in the mirror

<sup>10</sup> "Entrance & Exclusion," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol 43, p 30

<sup>11</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of Matthew](#), p 527

& you'll have your answer. Some will find the value of Christ too late. They'll suddenly realize how wrong they've been, but the door will already be shut. The world will one day declare that the followers of Christ made a wise decision. Today the door of salvation is wide open. Someday it will be shut forever. Make sure you're on the right side of the door when that day comes. PRAY