

The Parables

Part 12 – The Ten Virgins

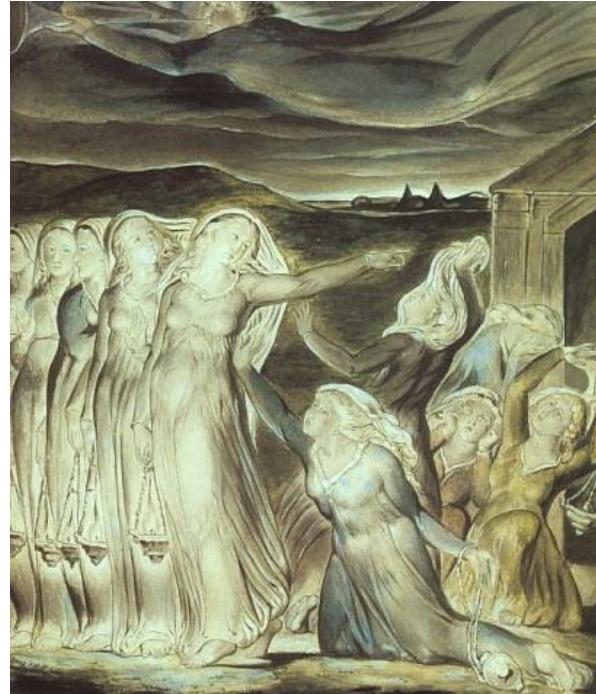
Matthew 25:1-13

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is about perceived delay. The setting is a man who is on his way to marry his betrothed. On the way to the festivities he will be joined by a company of ten young women. This festal gathering complete with torches will accompany the bridegroom to the wedding. Since the ten virgins do not know the exact time of the bridegroom's arrival they must be ready with enough oil for their torches to account for a long wait. Five of the ten failed to prepare for a long wait. The other five had equipped themselves with enough oil should the bridegroom's arrival take longer than they expected. The bridegroom would arrive just when he intended. But it would likely be perceived by some as a late arrival.

In this parable Jesus built upon that which is recorded in Matthew 24. He knew that following his resurrection and ascension the first generation of Christians would have no shortage of those predicting his immediate return. Jesus called them deceivers and false prophets. But those deceivers were persuasive. Many first generation Christians fully expected Jesus to return in their lifetime. By denying the possibility of a long wait they were in danger of being caught unprepared.

Throughout this body of teaching Jesus is speaking to covenant insiders. That is, he is speaking to those in the house of Israel, God's visible people. They had received the sign of the covenant, learned God's law, and tasted many of the benefits of God's covenant promises. But among them were those who nevertheless remained strangers to the Lord and were therefore entirely unprepared for his return. The same is true for God's new covenant people; the church. It is possible to be counted among God's visible people but to be among those to whom the Lord will say, "I do not know you" (25:12). Readiness, therefore, begins with repentance and faith. It begins with looking to Jesus in faith as Lord and Savior. And readiness continues in the same way. It continues by a lifestyle of putting sin to death, of daily trusting Jesus, and going about faithfully in your holy vocation to love God and neighbor.

Main Idea: Jesus is returning to judge the living and the dead so be ready.



Vs. 1 – We know little about wedding customs among first century Hebrews. Apparently, the ceremony was in several parts: a procession from the house of the groom to that of the bride or to some other place where the wedding occurred; then a procession, usually to the groom's home; then a great feast that could last for days. These young women were bridesmaids; they belonged to the bride's party, but not in our modern sense. Their role apparently was to greet the bridegroom along his route and escort him the last part of the festive procession. The word typically translated "lamp" is more likely "torch" – wooden staffs wrapped in oil soaked rags.

Vs. 3 – The foolish virgins had oil on their rags, as v. 8 indicates, but they had not brought enough oil to re-soak the rags to keep their torches lit in case of a lengthy wait. The wise virgins brought additional oil in flasks so that they would be sure to keep their torches burning.

Vs. 5 – A delay in the Lord's return is predicted in 24:48 and will appear again in 25:19. No doubt, when Matthew wrote his Gospel, there were already Christians wondering why the Lord had not already returned. In the parable both the wise and the foolish virgins fell asleep. There is not fault in this. The fault is in the failure to take precautions in order to be ready when the bridegroom appeared.

Vs. 6 – All through this section of the Gospel the emphasis is on the fact that the Lord will come when he is not expected. So the bridegroom's arrival at midnight underscores the necessity of readiness. In the parable the bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, at a time he is least expected, at the time when people are sleepy and not thinking at all about holy things and, in particular, about the return of Christ.

Vs. 9 – The response of the wise virgins must not be understood as selfish. This parable is not about sacrificial sharing. It is about being ready for the Lord's return. The point is that we cannot borrow someone else's preparedness.

Vs. 12 – The devastating words of bridegroom echo those which Jesus will speak on the day of judgment.

1. Jesus is returning.

Christianity is an eschatological faith. That is, it rests upon promises which will be fulfilled in an age yet to come. Because of the dying and rising of Jesus what has been corrupted by sin will be once again incorruptible. The dawning of the age to come will be inaugurated by the return of Jesus.

- Jesus will return unexpectedly (Matt 24:42, 44).
- Jesus will return visibly and audibly to all (Matt 24:27; 2 Thess 1:7; Rev 1:7).
- Jesus will gather his people living and dead (Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:23; 2 Thes 2:1-2).
- Jesus will judge the world (Matt 16:27; 25:31-32; 2 Thess 2:8).
- Jesus will welcome his people into his presence (1 Thess 4:16-17; Luke 23:43; Phil 1:21-23).
- Jesus will raise the dead (1 Cor 15:43-45, 52; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev 21:1-3).

2. Many are unprepared for Jesus' return.

We shouldn't make too much of the division in half of the ten virgins. The point is simply that while some will be prepared for Jesus' return many others will not. Keep in mind that Jesus is addressing covenant insiders; descendants of Abraham. It is a reminder that it is possible to have received the sign of the covenant, tasted of the goodness of the covenant blessings, and heard God's law and gospel yet remain a stranger to the Lord.

3. You cannot borrow from another's preparedness.

The foolish virgins wanted to use the oil which the wise virgins had supplied for themselves. Their refusal should not be understood as selfishness. This parable is not about selfless sharing. It is about spiritual preparedness. While there are many things we can and must share in this life spiritual preparedness cannot be borrowed from another.

4. Be ready for Jesus' return.

Jesus' words to the unprepared come by way of warning: "Truly I say to you, I do not know you." These words echo Jesus' other warnings about the devastating consequences of unbelief. Being prepared for Jesus' return is not about gaining secret knowledge as to the timing of events in the last days. Rather it is about being known by Jesus and daily faithfulness to him.

a) Repent – Turn away from your sin.

b) Believe – Believe upon the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

c) Continue – Continue in daily faithfulness.