

## Matthew 25:1–13

<sup>1</sup> “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, <sup>4</sup> but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> Since the bridegroom was long delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. <sup>6</sup> At midnight, there was a cry, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ <sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup> But the wise ones replied, ‘No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.’ <sup>10</sup> While they went off to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked. <sup>11</sup> Afterwards the other virgins came and said, ‘Lord, Lord, open the door for us!’ <sup>12</sup> But he said in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.’ <sup>13</sup> Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

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### Context

For the final three Sundays of this church year, the gospel readings come from Matthew 25:

- The Wise and Foolish Maidens (vv. 1-13)
- The Parable of the Three Servants (vv. 14-30)
- The Great Judgment (vv. 31-46) – Christ the King Sunday

Liturgically it is a movement towards Christ the King, the solemnity which celebrates the “end” when all things are brought to a good end, reconciled in Christ, King of the Universe. In Matthew’s schema of the gospel, this is the conclusion of Jesus’ fifth discourse (Mt 24:3-25:46) which R.T. France (2007, p.889) calls, “The End of the Old Order and the Reign of the Son of Man: The Discourse on the Future.” While 24:1 is clearly a transitional verse which includes v.2 to reveal what is on the mind of the disciples and Jesus’ ominous reply: <sup>1</sup> *Jesus left the temple area and was going away, when his disciples approached him to point out the temple buildings.* <sup>2</sup> *He said to them in reply, “You see all these things, do you not? Amen, I say to you, there will not be left here a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.”*

Once the destination is reached, it is clear how the disciples have understood Jesus in v.2: <sup>3</sup> *As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples approached him privately and said, “Tell us, when will this happen, and what sign will there be of your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Mt 24:1-3)*

This final Matthean discourse is about the future, with emphasis especially on the theme of judgment. It takes its cue from the disciples’ question in 24:3, which combines two aspects of the future, the predicted destruction of the temple (v.2) and Jesus’ “*coming and of the end of the age*”.

Scholars tend to agree as regards the destruction of the Temple since it is a known historical event, but there is disagreement about the transition of discussion to a more ultimate future. Is the Temple destruction a harbinger of the immediacy of the end of the age that includes the coming back (parousia) of Jesus? It would seem the disciples think so. But does Jesus answer their questions? The only mention of Jesus’ parousia within the first section of the discourse (24:27) is precisely to state that when it happens it will be universally clear, and quite unlike the confusion which will characterize the days leading up to .. to what? And here is the disagreement. Is Jesus speaking of the days leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem or to the end of the age? Are these two events the same?

The calamities leading up to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple and city are vividly described by the Jewish historian Josephus. In this text *The Jewish Wars* he is most descriptive about the siege conditions within Jerusalem as the city was encircled by the Roman army. Josephus

describes scene amidst a virtual civil war within the city, extended starvation, and a hellish nightmare as the capital reached its end: “*for at that time there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will be.*” (Mt 24:21) The following verses (vv. 29-31) are often referred to as “the little apocalypse.” But again, is this necessarily connected to the destruction of Jerusalem. Verse 29 simply says, “*Immediately after the tribulation of those days.*”

Historically, we would say that the Christian tradition does not record “*the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*” Most would conclude that coming lies somewhere in our future. But when? But then that has always been the question. One needs to be always prepared; ever ready.

## Commentary

<sup>1</sup> “*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.*” Be it parable or allegory, we are limited in dissecting this passage from the gospel. Many commentaries offer insight from wedding customs, but of another culture or age. One commentary I reviewed was assuming 10<sup>th</sup> century Jewish wedding customs from Spain reflected an unaltered liturgical custom. Possibly.

**What we know.** We know that weddings provided one of the high points in village life, and the question of who was and was not included affected one’s social standing. Our knowledge of Jewish wedding customs at the time is limited, leaving scholars to suggest analogies from other cultures; but it is probably wiser to admit our ignorance. This story mentions only two parties, the bridegroom and the ten girls. The precise role of the latter in the ceremonies is not clear but most scholars assume that Hellenistic-Roman marriage customs also apply in Jewish circles at the time, and thus the young women are servants from the bridegroom’s house, awaiting the return of the bridegroom with his bride after the wedding feast at her house. Possibly.

Boring notes, “Unfortunately, we do not know the marriage customs of first-century Palestine well enough to make definitive judgments on this basis, and the story itself is unclear on the procedures of the wedding celebration. Where is the bride, who is never mentioned? There do seem to be tensions with the customs described by Matthew in other allusions to weddings. In 22:1–2 there are no bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom’s arrival, but all come to the home of the bridegroom; in 9:15 members of the wedding party are mentioned, but not “virgins”. Further, details within the present story seem inherently unrealistic, whatever the wedding customs were: (1) the arrival of the bridegroom at midnight seems strange, but corresponds to the image of the thief in 24:43. (2) The notion that at midnight shops would be open where the foolish bridesmaids could go to buy oil also seems unrealistic and contrived.”

**Allegory.** Nonetheless, as parable or allegory, apart from our limited knowledge of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian wedding events, we offer some “allegorical” insights about the pericope. Central and primary would be an identification of Jesus as the bridegroom come the eschatological (end times) event. It echoes Matthew’s previous use of this imagery (9:15; 22:1–3), in Jesus’ being addressed as “Lord,” and in speaking in solemn, amen, pronouncements (25:12; cf. 5:18).

In the OT the image of God as bridegroom and Israel as bride is well steeped in the tradition and continued into the imagery of the NT writers with Christ as bridegroom and the church as the bride (John 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25–32; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9, 17). It should be noted here that the “church as bride” is not used in the Matthean text. Boring [450] notes that “To represent the church, Matthew needed a group in which the members looked the same to external appearances, but who would be separated at the parousia. The scene is analogous to 13:36–43, also a Matthean allegory in which the present mixture of authentic and pseudo-disciples will be sorted out only eschatologically. The ‘wise’

and ‘foolish’ terminology corresponds to 7:24–27, where two men build houses that superficially appear alike, but only one of which meets the eschatological test.”

Hence, the bridesmaids represent the church at the parousia of Jesus – a mixture of faithful and not so, of wise and of foolish, of the ready and the unprepared. They all have lamps and oil, and all sleep, but only some are really prepared for the eschaton when it comes. The bridegroom’s delay points out that both those who thought the parousia would never take place and those who counted on a long delay and thus “still had time” were tragically mistaken.

The bridegroom’s arrival is the parousia, with the same phrase, “to meet” (*eis apantēsin*), used here as in 1 Thess 4:17. Since Matthew designates the story as “like the kingdom of heaven,” this shows that the kingdom has a future aspect, that the final coming of the kingdom for which the church prays (6:10) is identical with the parousia of the Son of Man. Both Son of Man and kingdom of God have present and future aspects.

The oil, or rather having oil, represents what will count at the parousia: deeds of love and mercy in obedience to the Great Commandment (25:31–46). This makes contact with Jewish traditions that used oil as a symbol for good deeds (Num. Rab. 13:15–16), while in other symbolism oil represents the Torah (Deut. Rab. 7). The problem was not having “oil” and not that they went to sleep, since both the “wise” and the “foolish” bridesmaids fall asleep. Here, Matthew pictures preparation for the parousia as responsible deeds of discipleship, not constant “watching” for the end.

### ***The Church***

The young women are described with the Greek term for “virgins” which is meant to indicate unmarried friends or relatives of either the bride or the bridegroom. The story tells us that their role included escorting the bridegroom in a torchlight procession to his house, but that they were not present at whatever part of the ceremonies immediately preceded this procession. The unexpected delay at that point in the proceedings may have been caused by extended bargaining over the financial settlement, or by any number of other causes, deliberate or accidental. It does not matter; all that matters is the delay, and the effect it had on the readiness of the girls when the time for their part in the ceremonies eventually arrived.

The prequel to the procession is the wedding feast in the bridegroom’s house, the high point of the celebration. To miss that is to miss everything, and the ending of the story again shades off into the language of eschatological judgment, with the emphatic closure of the door, and the unavailing appeal by the excluded girls. Their address to the bridegroom as “*Lord, Lord*” and his response, “*I do not know you,*” read oddly in the narrative situation—of course the bridegroom knew his own wedding party! – but clearly recall the fate of the pseudo-disciples of 7:21–23.

Why then did the five foolish girls miss the feast? It was not that five slept and five stayed awake: v. 5 says explicitly that they all slept and all had to be awakened by the midnight shout. The problem goes back to the preparations they had made before going to sleep. We are offered no allegorical identification for the oil, and can only speculate as we have above. The preceding and following parables both indicate an ethical understanding of what it means to be ready, and this will be further underlined in vv. 31–46, but within this parable that is not spelled out. If there is any hint here as to what was lacking it is in the bridegroom’s verdict “*I do not know you,*” which, as in 7:21–23, indicates a criterion deeper than merely ethical correctness. But the point is simply that readiness, whatever form it takes, is not something that can be achieved by a last-minute adjustment. It depends on long-term provision, and if that has been made, the wise disciple can sleep secure in the knowledge that everything is ready.

If that is what the parable means, the addition of v. 13 seems quite inappropriate to the story on which it comments: “*stay awake*” is precisely what *none* of the ten girls did, and the sensible ones did not suffer because of their dozing. This is why some scholars wonder if this verse is an editorial comment, virtually repeating 24:42, where it preceded a parable which *was* about staying awake. But the metaphor of keeping awake was more concerned with readiness than with disrupting the normal routine of life, and that sense is indeed appropriate here, even though the metaphor used to express it is literally incompatible with the different imagery of the parable just concluded.

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