

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF WISDOM

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins

Read Matthew 25:1-13

There is a special category of Christ's parables that focuses on wisdom and folly: the five wise and five foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21), a shrewd man of the world (Luke 16:1-9), and the wise and foolish builders (Luke 6:46-49). In these stories our Lord shows that many of His hearers were foolish in terms of their own self-interest, and He prods them to a wiser course of action.

The story of the ten virgins is a masterpiece, as Bible students have long recognized. There were three stages to a Jewish wedding in that day. The first was *engagement* – a formal agreement made by the fathers. The second was *betrothal* – the ceremony where mutual promises are made. The third was *marriage* – approximately one year later when the bridegroom came at an unexpected time for his bride. In this parable, the first two stages should have already taken place.

THE PARABLE NARRATED

Jesus tells how ten young women were invited to a marriage feast. Five were wise and five were foolish. The wise women showed their wisdom by planning for the possible delay of the bridegroom. They took extra oil for their lamps so they would be ready when he came. The foolish women neglected to do so. While they waited, all fell asleep. Suddenly a cry went out that the bridegroom was coming. The wise got up and trimmed their lamps. The others recognized that they were out of oil and asked to borrow some. "No," said the wise. "There may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves." The women who were unprepared started off, but while they were gone, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went in with him to the feast. The door was shut. Later the foolish virgins returned and found the door barred.

"Open the door for us!" they cried. But the bridegroom said, "I don't know you."

The Lord concluded, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour [of my return]" (Matthew. 25:13).

The story is a masterpiece; it is not difficult to see its main points - the vast difference between the wise and the foolish women. In many respects they were alike. But in their preparation or lack of it, they were perfect opposites. On that difference, the lesson of the story turns.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THEM

It is worth seeing the ways in which the women were the same.

1. For one thing, all ten had been invited to the banquet. There may have been many who did not receive invitations, but each of them had received one and each was therefore right in anticipating a grand occasion when the bridegroom came.
2. Second, each had responded to the wedding invitation. Some may have disregarded it or scorned it but that was not the case with these women. They had received the invitation and had responded joyfully, which they demonstrated by waiting for the bridegroom's appearance.
3. Third, all clearly had some affection and even love for the bridegroom. That was what had brought them to the point at which the story commences: "Ten virgins ... took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom" (v.1).
4. Fourth, in spite of their affection, all were alike in that they became drowsy and fell asleep when the bridegroom was delayed.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE VIRGINS

But suddenly he came, and at once the similarities vanished and the essential difference emerged. Five had oil in their lamps and five did not. Five were ready and five were unprepared.

INTERPRETATION

The parable applies to the church. The setting of these last chapters of Matthew (Matthew 23-25) is the time leading up to the Lord's second coming. So, we must say, on the basis of the parable as well as our own observation, that there are people within the church who have heard the invitation of Christ, have responded somewhat, and may even be said to have affection for Jesus, but who are yet not ready to meet Him. They are good church people. They would never think of speaking a word against Jesus. But they are not born again. They do not have that inward change which alone entitles them to enter heaven.

That is how the oil in the story must be taken. Some have applied it to the Holy Spirit, which is a tempting thing to do since the Holy Spirit is often symbolized by oil in Scripture. But if we do that, we start thinking that one can have the Holy Spirit and then run out of Him, as it were, or that when one runs out, he needs to buy more. It is better to think of the oil simply as an inward preparation. Outwardly, the women were alike. The crucial and determining difference was within. John the beloved wrote in 1 John:

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” (1 John 2:19)

So, the first point of the parable is a question: Are you ready? Or are you among the five foolish women who had received the invitation, responded to it, and had some form of affection for the bridegroom, but who were not inwardly prepared? You should be among the wise who, although they, too, had fallen asleep, were nevertheless ready. On that distinction hangs your soul's destiny.

TIME OF CRISIS OFTEN REVEALS

The second point of the parable, which we have already hinted at, is that the difference between the condition of the wise and that of the foolish was revealed by the coming of the bridegroom. It revealed itself in crisis. During the days before the wedding or the night leading up to the start of the feast, few would have noticed that five women had adequately prepared for the bridegroom's coming and five had not. But suddenly the bridegroom came, and the distinction was immediately apparent.

The same will happen when the Lord Jesus Christ returns. Many who have considered themselves true children of God will be shown not to be, and many who have perhaps not been regarded as His children will be revealed to be believers.

How are you to know whether you are in one camp or the other?

To answer that question, I would like to suggest what is not found in the parable itself, but I think flows from it. If it is true that the crisis of the Lord's return and the final judgment associated with it will bring out the real condition of those who profess Christianity, is it not also the case that their true condition is revealed although lesser but, nevertheless, real crisis experiences now? I believe you can preview the results of the final judgment by the way you react to crises now.

Here is how one author puts it:

Nothing will more correctly reveal what is in a man than the coming upon him of some crushing or a time of crisis. Let it be temporal ruin by the failure of his calculations or the disappointment of all his hopes; let it be the entrance of the death-angel into his home and the removal from it of his nearest and dearest

earthly friend; let it be his own prostration by some serious illness which puts him face to face with his dissolution, and forthwith the extent of his resources is unfolded, and it is at once discovered both by others and by himself whether he is animated by unflinching faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, or whether he had been deceiving himself, all the while relying on some other support. It was a shrewd remark of Andrew Fuller that a man has only as much religion as he can command in trial.

Let us therefore look back upon the past and analyse our experiences at such testing times as those to which I have referred. We have all had them. We have all heard already, in some form or other, this midnight cry, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh"; for in every such surprise as those which I have described, Jesus was coming to us. How did we meet him then? Did our lamps go out? Or were we able to trim them and keep them burning brightly all through? Oh, if by any such event we discovered our utter resourcelessness, let us betake ourselves now to Christ that he may thoroughly renew us by his Holy Spirit and so prepare us for that last and solemnest crisis when over the graves of the slumbering dead the archangel shall cry out, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh," and all shall arise to stand before his great white throne.

THREE MORE LESSONS

This parable has three more lessons that I want to treat briefly.

First, the life of the Lord from Christ within is not transferable. I do not mean by that that one saved person may not be used of God to bring the gospel to another, for that happens, of course. Paul speaks of the gospel being passed "from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17 NKJV). I mean that no person can get by on another's faith. You cannot be saved by the life of Christ in another.

Many people delude themselves along those lines. They do not have true faith in Christ, but they have been exposed to it over a period of years and suppose that in the time of Christ's judgment, they will be able to appeal to God's work in the life of someone close to them.

"What right do you have to come into My heaven?"

"Well, I don't really know how to answer that, Lord. But I call Your attention to my mother. She was a godly woman, and I learned a lot from her."

"I didn't ask that," the Lord replies. "I asked: What right do you have to enter My heaven?"

"Look at my Sunday school teachers, Lord! They were godly people; they certainly went out of their way to reach me. They prayed for me, too. Don't forget them!"

Jesus replies, "What right do you have to enter heaven?"

I make the point because I believe it is the proper understanding of the five wise women refusing to give their oil to the five foolish ones. As a literal story, that seems uncharitable. The selfless thing for the wise women to do would have been for them to share their oil, even if it meant that they themselves would have run out. But the story is not moving on that level. It is teaching spiritual things, and in particular, that in the day of Christ's coming each person must stand on his own. Your mother's faith will not save you. Your wife's faith will not be useful to you. You will not 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?

Second, lost opportunities cannot be regained. The foolish women set out to buy oil. But the bridegroom was coming then, and they already were too late. The time to have bought oil was past. So, will it be

when Christ returns to judgment! Those who are ready will be taken into the marriage feast, and those who are not ready will be shut out.

Are you unsaved? If so, this moment is your opportunity. Do not say, "I will turn to Christ later. I will repent after I enjoy a few more years of sin. There is always time for Jesus." You do not know that. Today may be the last time you will hear the gospel. Even if it is not - even if you do hear it again and again - it will be no easier for you to turn to God later. In fact, the opposite is the case. The fact that you have rejected the free offer of God's grace now will harden you so that you will find it much more difficult to repent later. God may break you: He may do it through suffering, misery, or frustration. But He may not, and wisdom tells you to prepare now. *"Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation"* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Third, the Lord always comes without warning. He will do it in the day of His second coming. That is why the parable ends with the words: *"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"* (v. 13). Jesus will also come without warning on the day of your death, which amounts to the same thing.

Is Jesus your Lord? Make sure of it if you are uncertain. And *"watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"* in which you will be called to meet Him.