

A PARABLE OF READINESS

Matthew 25:1-13

We are looking at a longer passage this morning, so we will read it as we go. Let's dive in.

A PARABLE OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 25:1

1 “Then the kingdom of heaven may be compared to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.”

(Matthew 25:1, 2022 LSB)

Jesus introduces another parable of the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God

The phrases “Kingdom of Heaven” and “Kingdom of God” are synonymous in the Scriptures. Matthew primarily uses the “Kingdom of Heaven,” whereas Mark and Luke only use the “Kingdom of God.” The Gospel of John doesn't use either phrase.

Matthew contains ten “Kingdom” parables, most of which are in Matthew 13. Jesus introduces them by saying either “the Kingdom of Heaven is like” or “the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to.” For those who are interested, the words “like” and “compared to” come from the same Greek word as either an adjective (“like”) or a verb (“compared to”).

The Comparison

In our text today Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Jewish weddings were a three-part event. They began with an initial ceremony at the home of the bride, filled with dancing and celebration. Following this initial ceremony was the consummation of the marriage, and I'll leave it at that. They ended with the wedding feast at the home of the bridegroom, which often lasted an entire week. The friend of the bridegroom – the best man, we would say – would go ahead of the procession and announce that the bridegroom was coming. The bridegroom would lead the procession, followed by a group of unmarried girls – the virgins of the parable, friends of the bride, whom we would call bridesmaids. Ample lighting was partially a safety measure but mostly a matter of adding to the spectacle and

celebration.

A PARABLE OF WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS

Matthew 25:2-9

Jesus cautions us to pursue wisdom and forsake foolishness when He says,

2 “Now five of them [the virgins] were foolish, and five were prudent.

3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them,

4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.”

(Matthew 25:2–4, 2022 LSB)

The word “lamp” refers to a clay oil lamp that could be mounted on a pole for the wedding procession. They held a wick made of a twisted or braided material such as flax or papyrus which was immersed in the oil and set alight. As the wick burned, it drew up oil from the lamp. Since these clay lamps had recesses in the bottom for poles to be inserted, they would not typically be used in the house and would probably sit empty between wedding celebrations.

Candles existed back then, but they were expensive luxury items. Most people used clay lamps, which burned olive oil. Olive oil was used for a number of things in the home, including food, medicine, and lamps. By the time someone was in their teens, they would have a good idea of how much oil was required to keep a lamp burning through the evening. A typical lamp might hold three or four ounces of oil and burn for four or five hours. The flasks of oil carried by the sensible girls probably held a cup of oil or so, about eight ounces.

Five of the girls are **foolish** because they brought no oil for their lamps. The other five are called **prudent** or **sensible** because they brought enough oil for the evening. The sensible girls were not unusually intelligent, by the way. Knowing that you needed oil for an oil lamp was common sense.

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.”

(Matthew 25:5–7, 2022 LSB)

As I mentioned before, there was a span of time between the public ceremony at the house of the bride and the wedding feast at the house of the bridegroom. During this time the wedding guests would return to their own homes. When he was ready, the bridegroom would lead a procession through the village beginning at the home of the bride and ending up at his home where the

marriage feast would take place. A man known as the friend of the bridegroom – the best man, in our language – would go ahead of him to let the guests know that it was time. “Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” This was the role of John the Baptist, the forerunner to the Messiah, who went ahead of Jesus the Bridegroom to urge the people to get ready (John 3:26-30).

In the parable, the girls have fallen asleep because of the late hour but are awakened by the friend of the bridegroom. They quickly get up and prepare their lamps, trimming the burnt ends of the wicks, filling them with oil, and lighting them. That’s when the foolish girls realize that they’ve brought no oil.

8 “And the foolish said to the prudent,
 ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’
9 But the prudent answered,
 saying, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you too;
 go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ”
(Matthew 25:8–9, 2022 LSB)

I remember seeing a sign on a secretary’s desk that read, “A lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part.” It was a bit blunt, perhaps, but that’s the attitude of the sensible virgins. Each girl was responsible for her own preparations. The sensible girls had enough oil for the evening. If they shared their supplies with the foolish girls, none of them would have enough. It’s not a matter of selfishness but physics.

Being sensible, the sensible girls make a sensible suggestion: go buy the oil that you need. Yes, it was midnight, but keep in mind that this is a parable, not a historical account. The point is that each girl was responsible for her own preparedness. Readiness can’t be shared.

No one is responsible for your spiritual preparation except you. Let’s think on this for a moment.

JESUS THE MEDIATOR

The Scriptures are clear that God has no grandchildren. Every person must come to Him personally.

Now, it is true that Jesus Christ is our Mediator:

5 For there is one God,
and one mediator also between God and men,
the man Christ Jesus,
(1 Timothy 2:5, 2022 LSB)

As our Mediator Jesus has made a way for us to come to God the Father and be accepted.

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest [a mediator]
who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus the Son of God,
let us take hold of our confession.

15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses,
but One who has been tempted in all things like we are, yet without sin.

16 Therefore **let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace,**
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
(Hebrews 4:14–16, 2022 LSB)

Here's the thing. Jesus didn't go before the Father so that we don't have to. He doesn't say to us, "My child, you don't need to pray; I've already prayed in your name. You don't need to read; I've studied the Scriptures for you. You don't need to bless others; I've taken care of that. You don't need to worship; I've glorified the Father in your place." No, Jesus says to us, "Beloved child, I have paid the price. I have opened the gates of heaven for you. I have made a way for you to come to the Father. Go dressed in My righteousness, and you will be accepted. Go in the confidence that My God and Father will receive you as He receives Me. Go in My boldness. Go in My joy."

In this parable, Jesus strongly warns us to be wise and sensible rather than foolish. We must live in readiness for His coming, which means living in daily faith and faithfulness.

Listen to Him explain why this readiness is so crucial.

A PARABLE OF LOST OPPORTUNITY

Matthew 25:10-12

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 And later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.'

12 But he answered and said, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' "

(Matthew 25:10–12, 2022 LSB)

The bridegroom comes and finds half of the virgins out trying to find oil for their lamps. What does he do? He doesn't wait for them to return but continues on with the wedding procession. They had ample time to prepare. Their unpreparedness is their own fault; they can blame no one but themselves. The procession made its way to his home. Everyone went inside, and the door was shut. The word "shut" implies that the door was barred or locked from the inside. No one else will be permitted into the marriage feast.

As we see, when the foolish girls finally arrived, they found the door shut and barred. "Lord, Lord," they called, "open up for us!"

“LORD, LORD”: DEVOTION OR DECEPTION?

Names and titles are sometimes repeated in Scripture. It is never accidental but deliberate. Quite often this sort of repetition indicates a deeply felt, earnest plea full of intimacy and emotion.

Sometimes, the primary feeling was sadness, as when Jesus says,

**37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!
How often I wanted to gather your children together,
the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,
and you did not want it.”
(Matthew 23:37, 2022 LSB)**

Sometimes, the primary feeling was terror, with the speakers crying out for help, as when the disciples found themselves in a terrible storm on the Sea of Galilee:

**24 And they came to [Jesus] and woke Him up, saying,
“Master, Master, we are perishing!”
And He woke up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves,
and they stopped, and it became calm.
(Luke 8:24, 2022 LSB)**

Sometimes, the primary feeling is a sweet, kind tenderness, as when Jesus said:

**41 But the Lord answered and said to her,
“Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things ...”**

(Luke 10:41, 2022 LSB)

You see how this kind of phrasing works. Well, the repeated words “Lord, Lord” are used four times in the Gospels. In addition to our passage today, in Matthew 7:21-22 Jesus says,

21 “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.

22 Many will say to Me on that day, ‘**Lord, Lord,** in Your name did we not prophesy, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name do many miracles?’

23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; **DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’ ”**

(Matthew 7:21–23, 2022 LSB)

And in Luke 6:46 Jesus says,

46 “Now why do you call Me, ‘**Lord, Lord,**’ and do not do what I say?”

(Luke 6:46, 2022 LSB)

In every case where “Lord” is repeated – “Lord, Lord” – the speakers are assuming a relationship that doesn’t actually exist. “I never knew you,” Jesus says in Matthew 7. “I don’t know you,” the bridegroom says in Matthew 25. In Luke 6 Jesus points out the lying hypocrisy of those who call Him “Lord, Lord,” but refuse to obey Him.

Those who call Him “Lord, Lord” are like those whom Yahweh describes in Isaiah 29:13:

13 “... these people draw near with their mouth
And honor Me with their lips,
But they remove their hearts far from Me,
And their fear of Me is in the command of men learned by rote”

(Isaiah 29:13, 2022 LSB)

They are happy to say “Lord, Lord,” but keep their hearts and lives out of the reach of Christ.

What’s worse is that the speakers seem to imply that the Lord has made a dreadful mistake. “But Lord, Lord, haven’t we done all the things you like? Don’t You remember that we’ve prophesied and cast out demons and performed miracles? Lord, Lord, You forgot all about us; open the door so we can come in!”

But Jesus just shakes His head. “No, I never knew you. No, you can’t come in; I don’t know you.” It is impossible to fool the Lord Jesus Christ. John 2:23-25 makes it clear that there was never a time when He did not know everything about every person who ever lived. No one ever fooled Him. Judas Iscariot did a good job fooling the other disciples, but he never deceived Jesus. “Did I not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” He asks in John 6:70. Judas didn’t fool him. Jesus chose him to be the betrayer.

The truth is that the false believers of Matthew 7 and Matthew 25 could repeat “Lord” a hundred times and it wouldn’t change anything. They were never devoted to Christ; they simply attempt to deceive Him into thinking that they were.

The great error of those in Matthew 7 is that they presumed that all God wants is religious activity. The reality is that no amount of religious activity or good deeds can save anyone. God saves those who come to Him in faith and repentance. The great error of those in Matthew 25 is the assumption that, no matter what the Bible says, the Lord won’t actually turn them away. That was the devil’s lie to Eve if you remember: Oh, no, you won’t die.

Eternal life is not a reward for doing the right things. It is the gift of God to those whom He knows. In fact, Jesus says in His prayer in John 17,

**3 “And this IS eternal life,
that they may know You, the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”
(John 17:3, 2022 LSB)**

So, what’s the solution?

Let’s be very clear. There IS no solution for those who wait until the day of judgment has come. There is no solution for those who wait until the door is closed. The Bible says that it is appointed by God that people die once and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

The obvious solution for those who are unsaved is to not just say, “Lord, Lord,” but to actually surrender their lives to Him as Lord and trust Him as Savior. We can be sure of two things. First, verbal claims of being a Christian are worthless. It doesn’t matter how much someone calls Jesus “Lord” if you refuse to obey Him as Lord. And second, those who truly abandon their false claims of spiritual life, turn to Jesus in faith, and trust Him alone for salvation will be saved.

BRINGING IT HOME

Matthew 25:13

Once again Jesus gives us a clear, unmistakable application of this Scripture to our lives:

13 “Therefore, stay awake,
for you do not know the day nor the hour.”
(Matthew 25:13, 2022 LSB)

Jesus commands us to stay awake, to remain alert. We are each given a certain amount of time to live, and our time is running out.

The lamps of the foolish virgins were dry and useless. What is the state of *your* lamp today? Do you maintain it daily with the Word of God, worship and prayer, service, faith, and faithfulness to Christ? It really takes so little when you think about it. Filling a lamp was not an all-day task. We are all prone to neglect the disciplines of the faith and let our lamps dry out. I struggle with this as much as anyone else.

I want to remind you that our God is not far away in heaven, passively watching us from a tremendous distance. He is with us every moment of every day. We are doubly held in the hand of God the Father and the hand of Christ Himself. The Spirit of God indwells us and makes His home within us. Jesus promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Paul testified that the Lord stood with him and strengthened him (Second Timothy 4:17).

The Holy Spirit accomplishes all the hard work of our sanctification. The Father wills our salvation, the Son purchased it, and the Holy Spirit applies it to our lives.

Our part is the easy part, frankly. Keep your lamp filled each day. Get into the Word of God, and pray in response. Worship the Father in holiness. Serve the saints and share the Gospel as you have the opportunity. Pray that the Lord will burn brightly in your life.

Beloved, not one of us lives perfectly as we ought. But we have a Savior who delivers us, a Lord who guides us, a Shepherd who nourishes us, a King who protects us, and a Father who loves us. Cast yourself into His hands. Trust His providence and sovereignty. Rejoice in His promises. Worship Him with all of your life.

