

## ARE YOU READY? Matthew 25:1-13

**Matthew 25:1** begins with the word *Then*, which connects chapter 24 to chapter 25. These two chapters record the “OLIVET DISCOURSE.” **Matthew 24:1-3** sets the occasion: Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” The OLIVET DISCOURSE is the Lord’s response to these questions. Chapter 24 is the prophetic declaration of Christ’s Second Coming. Chapter 25 records the practical implications of the Second Coming. In chapter 25, the Lord teaches his disciples how to live in the last days with three parables: the Parable of the Ten Virgins in verses 1-13, the Parable of the Talents in verses 14-30, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in verses 31-46.

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS rests on two facts about the end of the world: Jesus is coming again and no one knows when Jesus will come again. How should we live in light of these facts? **Matthew 25:1** answers: “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” In ancient weddings, the groom was the star, not the bride. He would travel to the bride’s father’s house, where the ceremony would take place. He would then lead a procession to his house for the marriage feast. The ten virgins were chaste, unmarried bridesmaids who were invited to participate in the wedding procession. In the end, some were ready and some were not. The prepared enjoyed the marriage feast. The unprepared were shut out. The point of this parable is clear and simple: Make sure you are ready to meet the Lord when he comes.

A farmer, who lived in a storm-prone area, interviewed several young men to work on his farm. He had one question for each: “Do you know how to sleep on a windy night?” One boy answered, “Yes, I sleep lightly and wake up every once in a while to check for a storm.” The farmer said to the boy, “Sorry, but you will not do.” The second answered, “Yes, sir, I know how to sleep on a windy night. I set the alarm for every three or four hours to check the weather.” The farmer said, “No, you will do no.” The third boy answered, “I sleep soundly on a windy night. When I notice overcast clouds and feel a storm is coming, I check everything in preparation for the storm. I get a hammer and nails and tack up the loose clapboards on the side of the house. I go to the barn to secure the horses and cows. I make sure the chickens are safe in the henhouse. I fix the gate and mend the fence. After checking the locks, I go to bed and sleep soundly because I took care of everything before the storm. Of course, the farmer gave him the job, because he knew how to sleep on the windy night.”

Do you know how to sleep on a windy night? Do you have enough oil to keep your lamp burning? Are you ready to meet the Lord when he comes? THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS teaches three requirements for spiritual preparation.

## I. SPIRITUAL PREPARATION REQUIRES WISDOM.

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS is a private parable addressed to the small band of professing believers who continued to follow Jesus after Israel rejected him. Jesus tells his disciples about ten virgin bridesmaids who were invited to be a part of the wedding procession. Five of these virgins were wise, five were foolish. Five were prepared to meet the bridegroom, five were not. Five enjoyed the wedding feast, five were barred from it. But they all begin the story the same way. Verse 1 says they “took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” This parable addresses professing believers. It is not to or about sinful, unbelieving people. Jesus is speaking to those who expect to get into the kingdom of heaven. He is talking to members of the church. He is talking to you and me. In this parable, the Lord is saying that spiritual preparation requires wisdom.

### A. THE DISTINCTION OF WISDOM

These ten virgins had a lot in common. All of them were invited to the wedding feast. All accepted the invitation. All went out to meet the bridegroom. All had lamps. All had oil in their lamps. All fell asleep while waiting for the bridegroom. All were awakened by the midnight cry. All arose to prepare their lamps. And all ten virgins expected to join the wedding feast. But there was a vital difference between these bridesmaids. Verse 2 says: “Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.” The same is true of every group of professing believers. Some are foolish, some are wise. Some are ready to meet the Lord, some are not. Some are lost, some are saved.

Whenever a church meets together, two churches are always present: an outward church and an inward church. The outward church is whoever shows up. It consists of members, regular attenders, invited guests, and nominal Christians. It consists of some who know the Lord, some who are seeking the Lord, and some who are nothing more than religious hypocrites. The inward church, on the other hand, is the “invisible” church made up of true believers in Jesus Christ. This is the reality of every church. But we do not know who is real and who is not. The Lord knows who are his. But we do not. From our perspective, all of the virgins seem wise. We cannot tell the wise virgins from the foolish virgins.

**Matthew 13:24-30** records THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE TARES. A man planted good seed in his field. While he slept, his enemy planted weeds in the field. When they both sprang up, a servant volunteered to cut down the weeds. But the master was concerned that the servant would pull up wheat as he pulled up the weeds. So he let them grow together until the harvest. This is the state of the church today. Just because you go to church does not mean you are going to heaven. There are tares among the wheat. And the Lord will not sort them out until the final harvest. But this reality should lead to self-examination. Are you wise or foolish or wise? Are you what or tare? Are you a true Christian or a Christian in name only? Don't look at others. Examine yourself to see if you are in truly in the faith.

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## B. THE DEMONSTRATION OF WISDOM

Verses 3-4 explain the folly of the foolish virgins and the wisdom of the wise virgins: “For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.” These lamps were more like torches. Festive sticks would be draped with rags, soaked in oil, and lit. But the light would soon go out. And more oil was needed to keep the lamp burning. The supply or lack of oil is the primary concern of the parable. The **oil** does not have any special or specific meaning. It simply represents whatever is needed to be ready when the Lord returns. The five foolish ones are called such because they did not prepare. And the five wise ones are called such because they did.

This parable illustrates the upside-down kingdom of heaven. The five foolish girls are called foolish because they did not bring extra oil for their lamps. However, that was actually the prudent thing to do. They had been invited to an afternoon wedding that would most likely last into the early evening. So they planned accordingly. They brought lamps filled with oil. This is all that would be needed if everything went according to schedule. In fact, I can imagine these foolish virgins laughing at the wise virgins for bringing extra oil. Why would they unnecessarily complicate their journey by preparing for an unlikely contingency?

But these foolish virgins were indeed foolish. They had the same set of facts the wise virgins had. They knew the bridegroom was coming for the wedding feast and that they needed oil in their lamps to meet him. The problem was not a lack of information. It was indifference. They didn’t plan ahead because they were thinking about themselves, not about the bridegroom. So they were not ready to meet him when they come. This is the evidence of genuine saving-faith: You will do whatever it takes to be ready to meet the Lord. It may be that you prepare by securing what you need, as the wise virgins did. Or it may mean that you get rid of something that you do not need in your life. True believers will do whatever it takes to be ready to meet the Lord. **Philippians 3:20-21** says, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

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## II. SPIRITUAL PREPARATION REQUIRES WAITING.

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS is immediately preceded by the Parable of the Wicked Servant recorded in **Matthew 25:45-51**. It tells of a servant who neglects his duties and abuses his fellow servants, thinking his master will be away for a long time. The master’s sudden arrival catches him unprepared. And he is not just punished, **Matthew 25:51** says the master “will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites.” THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS is the other side of the coin. The

wicked servant was unprepared because he thought the master's absence would be long-term. But the five foolish virgins were unprepared because they thought the arrival of the bridegroom would be immediate. This is the tension of kingdom living in the last days. We must live as if Christ might come today. But we must plan as if Christ might not come for many years.

**A certain man had to run at his office and took his young son with him. He asked the boy to wait on the outside steps while he went inside to do his work. Soon he became so engrossed with the business that he forgot about his son waiting outside. Leaving the building by a different door, he went home alone. Several hours later the family sat down to dinner, but the son was not present. His mother became anxious and wondered where he might be. Then the father remembered where he had left his son. Hurrying back to his place of work, he found his son, tired and hungry, waiting as he had been instructed. "I knew you would come, father," he said. "You said you would."**

Admittedly, this is not a perfect illustration. Our Father in heaven does not forget his children. He always knows who you are and where you are. But the focus of the story is not the father. It is the son. And the issue is not whether God is like that forgetful father. It is whether you are like that patient child. Are you prepared to wait on the coming of the Lord? **Robert Farrar Capon** writes: "The bridegroom is late for his own party. God has taken so long to do anything that the world has dug its own grave in the meantime. Unless there is something other than the wisdom of the world to help it; there is nothing for the world to do but to lie down and die." Where do you stand? Will you play the fool and adopt the wisdom of the world that is passing away? Or will you be wise and wait on the Lord until he returns?

**Matthew 24:13** says, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." In **John 8:31-32**, Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And **1 Corinthians 15:58** says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the word of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Spiritual preparation necessitates steadfast perseverance. But here's the good news. The perseverance of the saints is made possible because of the preservation of the saints. **Philippians 1:6** says: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

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### **III. SPIRITUAL PREPARATION REQUIRES WATCHFULNESS.**

Jesus often leaves his parables open-ended. But in verse 13 Jesus gives the central application of this parable: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Here is the message of this parable in one word: Watch. This does not mean that you should quit society, go sit on a mountain, and look into the sky until Jesus comes. To watch is to be awake and alert and attentive. It is not the picture of a stargazer on a mountain. It is the picture of a soldier on his post. Spiritual preparation requires watchfulness. You must watch your character and your

conduct and even your companions. The closing movement of this parable teaches us three reasons for constant spiritual vigilance.

#### **A. TIME IS UNPREDICTABLE.**

The delay of the bridegroom is the crisis of the parable. This crisis is intensified by the bridegroom's sudden arrival. Verse 6 says: But at midnight there was a cry, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." The time reference – "midnight" – does not have any special or specific meaning. It simply highlights that the bridegroom arrived at a time when no one expected him. His delay was so long that all of the bridesmaids went to sleep. Then, late in the night, when the girls had fallen into a deep slumber, the herald cried out, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him."

The sudden arrival of the bridegroom emphasizes the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. **1 Thessalonians 4:16** says: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." These are all the preliminaries that need to take place before the Lord Jesus returns. And this angelic announcement and celestial trumpet blast could happen at any moment. Jesus may return before this sermon is over. Jesus may return tomorrow. Jesus may return next week. We do not know. **Matthew 24:36-39** says: "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. The day you will meet the Lord is unpredictable. So you don't have time to waste. You must be ready to meet the Lord now.

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#### **B. SALVATION IS PERSONAL.**

Verses 7-9 reports: Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' When the announcement of the bridegroom's arrival was announced, all ten bridesmaids awoke and began to light their torches. But the five foolish ones quickly discovered they did not have enough oil to keep their torches lit. So they asked the five wise ones to share their oil. But the wise ones wisely refused the foolish request of the foolish ones. They stated the obvious: "there will not be enough for us and for you." Then they gave the five foolish bridesmaids some unhelpful advice: "go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." But do not accuse these wise girls of being selfish, uncaring, or inconsiderate. They responded the way they were supposed to respond. They responded the way you would have responded. They responded the same way

others should respond to you when you are trying to look ready without being ready. Their response is a warning: There are some things that cannot be shared.

Salvation is a personal matter. I did not say it is a private matter. Salvation is definitely not private. We see that in the fact that no individual bridesmaid is ever referred to in this parable. They are always referred to in groups: ten virgins, five wise, five foolish. Salvation is not a private matter. But it is a personal matter. Saving faith cannot be shared, bestowed, or transferred. You cannot get to heaven on someone else's faith. When the Lord asks you why he should let you in his heaven, you must give a personal response. Your parents' faith cannot save you. Your pastor's diligence will not help you. Your friends' readiness does not make you ready to meet the Lord. Conversely, your parents' failure, pastor's moral fall, or friends' hypocritical ways are not legitimate excuses for you to not to be ready. You must ready. Period. If you miss heaven, it will be no one else's fault but your own.

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### C. JUDGMENT IS FINAL.

Verse 10 says, "And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut." The foolish girls followed the unhelpful advice of the wise ones and went to buy oil. But while they were going, the bridegroom arrived. The wise ones – characterized as "those who were ready" – went into the feast with him.

Pay close attention to the last phrase of verse 10: "and the door was shut." This is a graphic picture of final judgment. The door was shut. There is a door of salvation that leads to heaven. It is the door of God's amazing grace, held open by a bloody cross and an empty tomb. The door has been open for centuries. It is open right now. Above the door is a sign that reads: "Whoever will, let him come." Anyone, anywhere, anytime can go through the door and find forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. But there is coming a day when that door will be shut. And you will have to meet the Lord in the condition you are in when either you die or Jesus comes again – whichever comes first.

After a three-month summer recess, the U.S. Supreme Court opened its 1994-95 term on October 3, 1994. According the New York Times the court's legal business for that first day could be summed up with one word: No. The court announced it had refused to hear more than 1,600 cases. The names and docket numbers of the rejected appeals covered 68 typewritten pages. For those cases, that was the last court of appeal, the final word. No appeals. No arguments. The Supreme Court says not and that's it. Likewise, on the judgment day, there will be a terrible crescendo of no's. And the door will be shut forever. **MICHAEL GREEN** comments: "Too late" are terrible words. The job has been lost: it is too late now to say you will try harder. The divorce has come through: it is too late now to make amends. The examination starts today: It is too late now to prepare for it! And those terrible words are never more awesome then when applied to the Second Coming."

Verses 11-12 report: "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I did not know you.'" The five

foolish virgins somehow found a dealer to open his store after midnight to sell them oil. But do not mistake this for zealous preparation. It was last-minute desperation. And it was too late. They pleaded with the bridegroom. But his initial gracious invitation was cancelled out by the humiliation of them not being ready to receive him. So he answered, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” He did not just deny them entrance into the feast. He denied them the privilege of any fellowship with him. His words – “I do not know you” – denied any past or future relationship with the five foolish bridesmaids. He cut them off from him and his bride forever. So it will be on the last day. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

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I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that God is the God of second chances. The Lord delights to give sinful people a second chance, a fresh start, and a new beginning. But there is some bad news we must come to grips with: The God of the second chance is also the God of the last chance. God is slow to anger. But if you are slow to repent, trust, and obey, his slow anger will eventually catch up with you. This is the punch-line of the parable. It is a parable of judgment that warns us not to miss the party by being unready when Jesus comes.