

**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**

The gospel readings for the 29th through 31st Sundays in Lectionary Cycle A all describe a series of confrontations between Jesus and religious authorities of Jerusalem, namely the scribes and Pharisees. The reading for the 31st Sunday ends with Jesus warning the disciples to not become hypocrites like the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:12). It would seem like one more verse would have been a capstone to the warning: “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites*” (v.13)

And this was just the first of several “woes” cast upon the religious leaders. The “woe to you” verses continue unrelentingly through the end of Mt 23. The chapter's penultimate end is the warning: “*Amen, I say to you, all these things [the woes described] will come upon this generation.*” The ultimate chapter-end are vv. 37-39, Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem with a denunciation of the current religious leadership. The verses also include a prophetic reference to the 70 AD Roman destructions of

Jerusalem and the Temple: “*Behold, your house will be abandoned, desolate.*” (v.38) and the prophecy that after that event, “*I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’*” - repeating the Palm Sunday proclamation for the Messiah, pointing ahead to Jesus’ return.

While not a part of Ordinary Time readings, Chapter 24 continues this theme of imminent destruction and coming tribulation (Mt 24:1-28) <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.”* <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 apocalyptic chapter ends with a description of the coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:29-31) and final warnings about not knowing the time or date of the return of the Master. It is at this point that we turn the page to encounter our Sunday gospel: The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt 25:1-13).

It is here in Matthew 25 that we will finish the final three Sundays of this cycle of Ordinary Time:

- 32nd Sunday: The Wise and Foolish Maidens (vv. 1-13)
- 33rd Sunday: The Parable of the Three Servants (vv. 14-30)
- Christ the King: The Great Judgment (vv. 31-46)

The biblical scholar R.T. France (2007, 889) calls these two chapters, “The End of the Old Order and the Reign of the Son of Man”

This final Matthean discourse focuses on 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 and Jesus’ “coming (parousia) and the end of the age”. With regard to the former the question is “When?,” with regard to the latter “What will be the sign?” In either focus, they are precursors of judgment.

## Commentary

The gospel reading begins: “Jesus told his disciples this parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven will be like...’” and then goes on to place the parable in the midst of a first century wedding celebration. Both of Matther’s use of a wedding celebration setting are a part of the overarching message about the Kingdom of Heaven.

- The Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14; gospel for the 28th Sunday): This parable is unique to the Gospel of Matthew and directly addresses the theme of the Kingdom of Heaven. In this parable, a king prepares a great wedding feast for his son, symbolizing God's invitation to people to enter His Kingdom. The initial guests (representing the religious leaders of the time) reject the invitation, and the king invites others from the streets and highways (representing the Gentiles and outcasts). The parable teaches that those who accept the invitation and come properly attired (with righteousness) will be part of the Kingdom, but those who reject it will be excluded. This parable reinforces the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven is open to all, regardless of their social or religious status, but there is a minimum standard of life by which one remains in the celebration.

- The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13): In this parable, Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to ten young women awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom for a wedding. Five are wise and prepared with enough oil for their lamps, while five are foolish and unprepared. When the bridegroom finally arrives, the wise virgins enter the wedding feast, but the foolish ones are left out. This parable emphasizes the importance of readiness and vigilance for the coming of the Kingdom. Those who are spiritually prepared will enter, while those who are not will miss out.

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. A first-century Jewish wedding in the time of Jesus was a significant cultural event with several distinct stages and ceremonies. The details of these weddings are primarily derived from historical and cultural sources of the time, including the Mishnah (a collection of Jewish oral traditions compiled in the 2nd century CE) and archaeological discoveries. While there is no direct account of a first-century Jewish wedding in the New Testament, we can reconstruct the general process based on these sources. It's important to note that some variations in wedding customs existed depending on the region and specific Jewish community. Here is a brief summary of the known wedding customs.

In the first century Jewish culture, parents typically arranged marriages for their children. The prospective groom's parents would approach the parents of the bride-to-be with a marriage proposal. This led to the initial stage of a Jewish wedding, the betrothal, which was a legally binding contract (*cf.* Luke 1:27 “*to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary*”). During this time, the bride and groom were considered husband and wife, even though they did not yet live together. Betrothals were typically arranged when the bride and groom were quite young, and the actual wedding would take place later. In the meantime the bride continued to live with her parents.

At the appointed time the groom, accompanied by his groomsmen, would proceed to the bride's house. They would return together in a procession to the groom's house for the ceremony and the festivities. The procession might be animated with shouting or the blowing of the shofar and was typically at nighttime so lamps were needed. The main part of the celebration was a festive banquet where guests would gather to celebrate the newlyweds. The feast often lasted for several days, during which time there was dancing, music, and rejoicing.

“...the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.” (Mt 25:1) As best we can know the scene is part of the procession returning to the bridegroom's home. This story mentions only two parties, the bridegroom and the ten girls. The precise role of the young women 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.

The young women are described with the Greek term for “virgins” (*parthenos*). *Parthenos* occurs 15 times in the NT: 6 times in 1 Corinthians, 4 times in Matthew, twice in Luke, and once each in Acts, 2 Corinthians, and Revelation.

Occasionally *parthenos* refers just to a young woman of marriageable age. This is the case, e.g., in the parable of the ten *parthenos* (Matt 25:1, 7, 11), the young women who are waiting for the bridegroom and are as yet unmarried. The point of the parable does not depend on their “virginity” in the strict sense. Similarly, *parthenos*' use seems unrelated to the point of verse. For example, in Acts 21:9 - “*He had four virgin daughters gifted with prophecy.*” The four daughters of Philip are described as “young”

and *parthenos*. Here the reference is likely that they had reached a marriageable age and presumably also virgins - but the description is apart from the main point of the verse: prophetic gifts. So too, in Matthew's use of *parthenos*. The point of the pericope is about preparedness. Perhaps "young" is a more german aspect. (Note: In Matthew and Luke, in reference to Mary, the intended meaning is "virgin" in the strict sense. St. Paul's use is mixed) [Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider. Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament 1990, Vol 3:39]

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. There is an unexpected delay. The reasons for which do not matter. All that matters is the delay, and the effect it had on the readiness of the young women when the time for their part in the ceremonies eventually arrived. Their role seems to have been to be a formal escort into the wedding feast at the bridegroom's house, the high point of the celebration.

Entering the celebration with the bride and bridegroom is the turning point of the parable. To miss that is to miss everything: *"the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked."* (Mt 25:10) The emphatic closure and locking of the door harkens to a scene of eschatological (end-times) judgment.

At this point it is good to remember an earlier Matthean scene when Jesus is teaching the followers what it means to be true disciples: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.'" (Mt 7:21-23)*

The earlier teaching is echoed here in the parable when the foolish young women address the bridegroom as *"Lord, Lord, open the door for us"* and his response is, *"I do not know you."* Clearly the bridegroom knew his own wedding party, but that is not the point of the parable. The question that begs an answer is why then did the five foolish ones 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. At the core of the problem is that they lacked oil for their lamps. While the parable itself offers no allegorical identification for the oil, we do know that oil is a rich and multifaceted symbol in both the Old and New Testaments. Its symbolic use carries various meanings and significance in different contexts. Here are some of the key ways in which oil is symbolically used in both the Old and New Testaments:

- Anointing and Consecration: Oil was often used to anoint and consecrate individuals for specific roles and purposes. Kings, priests, and prophets were anointed with oil as a sign of God's chosen and set-apart status. For example, David was anointed with oil by the prophet Samuel before becoming king (1 Samuel 16:13).
- Healing and Restoration: Oil was used for medicinal purposes and symbolized healing and restoration. In the famous "Good Samaritan" parable, the Samaritan poured oil and wine on the wounds of the injured man to help heal and soothe his injuries (Luke 10:34).
- Joy and Celebration: Oil was often used as part of festive occasions and celebrations. It was associated with joy, abundance, and blessings. In the psalms, the anointing of the head with oil is linked to the overflowing cup of God's goodness (Psalm 23:5).

- **Sacrifice and Atonement:** In some sacrificial rituals, oil was used as an offering to God. It symbolized consecration and reconciliation with God. It was also a component of the anointing oil used in the tabernacle and temple rituals (Exodus 30:22-33).
- **Anointing of Jesus:** In the New Testament, the anointing of Jesus' head or feet with oil is a symbol of reverence and recognition of His identity as the Messiah. The woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume in Luke 7:36-50 demonstrated deep love and devotion.
- **Healing and Miracles:** In the ministry of Jesus and the early Christian Church, oil was used in conjunction with healing and miracles. In the book of James, anointing with oil is associated with prayer for the sick (James 5:14-15).
- **Illumination and Guidance:** Oil lamps were common sources of light in the ancient world. Oil symbolizes illumination, guidance, and the presence of God's Word. The psalmist describes God's Word as a lamp to one's feet and a light to one's path (Psalm 119:105).

Certainly the last example is one that pertains to this parable in the literal sense. One might well argue that to have a full measure of oil in the allegorical sense is to have let the light of Christ illuminate, guide and help you prepare for this life and the next. The preceding and following parables both indicate an understanding of what it means to be ready. 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.

All that being said, one is then struck with the oddness of v.13 - *“Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”* Its oddness is that “staying awake” is precisely what none of the ten girls did, and the wise ones did not suffer because of their dozing. It is almost as though it is an added on as it virtually repeats Mt 24:42, where it precedes a parable which was about staying awake. Nonetheless both Matthew and Luke use this expression with a sense of vigilance and readiness. With that language already in play with Matthew, one might simply offer vigilance and readiness, necessarily encompass preparedness, which is a concern of the parable.

At the center of the parable are the *“ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise”* Matthew has already used this doublet in the Sermon on the Mount. At the opening of the Sermon, Matthew 5:13, *“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”* The expression *loses its taste*, literally “becomes foolish.”

And again at the closing of the Sermon in the parable of the two house-builders (Mt 7:24-27): *“Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them **will be like a fool** who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined.”* (Mt 5:24-27)

The wisdom/foolishness is centered on having gathered sufficient oil for the task at hand - being vigilant and prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom: *The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps.* (Mt 25:3-4) The portable torches for outdoor use (the word is not the same as that used for a standing domestic lamp in 5:15 and 6:22) would be bundles of cloth mounted on a carrying stick and soaked with oil. The jars held the oil

into which the torch was dipped before lighting. A torch without a jar of oil is comparable to a modern flashlight without a battery.

<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.* (Mt 25:5-7)

The parable gives the impression that the young women thought they knew when the bridegroom would arrive, and had not reckoned on the delay. A torchlight procession would of course be after dark, but might be expected to be before the middle of the night. The parable thus illustrates both the fact that the time of the *parousia* is unknown, and may not be as soon as people might expect, and also its sudden, unexpected nature when it does come, the middle of the night being the time when people are at their least alert. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel both these factors might be expected to be in play, with some Christians anxious over the delay of the “imminent” *parousia*, and others complacent after years of unfulfilled prediction. But the story does not develop as the call to vigilance in the earlier Matthean parables might have led us to expect: the wise ones did not stay awake while their companions slept. All were equally disappointed by the delay, all fell asleep, and all were equally taken by surprise by the eventual shout.

<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.'*

We do not know whether the torches had been lit when the girls first set out, but if so they would not have stayed burning while they slept; even a well-soaked torch would not burn for much more than a quarter of an hour. So the wise ones would re-soak and light their torches, while the attempts of the foolish ones were of course futile: “*for our lamps are going out*” suggests that as they lit the torches they immediately went out again, having no more oil to keep them burning. The response of the wise ones to their natural request for a share of the oil may sound selfish, and perhaps in a real life situation they might have been willing to share—though if their supply too was limited, to keep it for themselves ensured that at least *some* torches would stay alight. But in a parable things do not always happen according to real life, and the hard-nosed realism of the wise girls invites the reader to reflect that spiritual preparedness is not something that others can provide for you: each needs their own oil.

One might note that the idea a merchant would be open in the middle of the night is not realistic, but it is a parable, and such an idea serves a rich irony to the reader in the vain attempt to prepare when it is already too late.

<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.*

When the bridegroom arrives, the feast begins. As in other celebrations depicting the blessings of the kingdom of heaven (8:11–12 and 22:1–13). Only those who are prepared will enjoy the celebration.

One odd element, at least for real life, is the closing of the door, which seems out of place in the open hospitality and conviviality of a village wedding; late arrival is not normally an issue in oriental society, certainly not penalized in such a dramatic fashion. But then this is a parable which like so many of the other parables, a story of insiders and outsiders, of the saved and the lost, and the closing of the door symbolizes that final division at the last judgment - which is clearly a theme as one moves through Mt 25.

<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.'*

Such is the plaintive cry of those who thought they ought to be included. With the emphatic formula, “*Amen, Amen*” the following words have the force of a judicial verdict. “*I do not know you.*” This dramatic verse carries a profound and symbolic meaning within the context of the parable and possibly underscores several important spiritual concepts:

**Spiritual Preparedness:** The parable of the ten virgins is a story of readiness for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. The five wise virgins represent those who are spiritually prepared and vigilant, while the five foolish virgins represent those who are unprepared and lack spiritual readiness. The statement by the bridegroom highlights the consequences of being unprepared. In the spiritual context, not being “known” by the bridegroom means that one is not recognized as part of the prepared and faithful community.

**Personal Relationship:** The phrase “I do not know you” also reflects the idea of a personal relationship with God. In the Christian tradition, knowing God is often associated with having a close and intimate relationship with Him through faith and obedience. The unprepared virgins are symbolically shown as lacking this personal relationship with the bridegroom be it through faith or obedience to the Word of God.

**Exclusivity of the Kingdom:** The statement conveys the exclusivity of the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, only those who are spiritually prepared, who have a genuine relationship with God, and who have lived in accordance with His teachings will be welcomed into the Kingdom.

**Finality:** The statement carries a sense of finality and judgment. In the context of the parable, once the door to the wedding feast is shut, it is too late for the foolish virgins to gain entry. This emphasizes the idea that there will be a point of no return in the eschatological events, and individuals must be prepared beforehand.

It is striking that the comparatively trivial lapse of a failure to be provided with oil has come to symbolize an ultimately false relationship; they are not part of Jesus’ true family (12:50).

### **A Final Thought**

Eugene Boring [1994, 451] offers:

Right at the beginning of the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Jesus tells us that five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The reason why he tells us this from the onset is that we cannot tell this just by looking at them. All ten have come to the wedding; all ten have their lamps aglow with expectation, all ten, presumably, have on their bridesmaid gowns. We would never guess from appearances that half were wise and half foolish.

No, it is not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that sets the wise apart from the foolish - it's the readiness. Five of the bridesmaids are ready for the groom to be delayed, but the other five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start whenever the groom arrives; the foolish only have enough oil for their own timetable. Five are prepared and ready, even for a delay; five are not.

Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an

evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.

At the beginning of the life of faith, you cannot really tell the followers of Jesus apart. They all have lamps; they are all excited about the wedding; they all know who to sing, “Lord, Lord.” Deep into the night, when we spot some persons attempting in vain to fan a dying flame to life, we begin to distinguish wisdom from foolishness.

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## Scripture

*The New American Bible* available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/>