

Kingdom Parables

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

XXVII. The Parable of the Ten Virgins Matthew 25:1-13

A. The Central Point of the Parable

Christ's second coming will occur at an unexpected time. Only those who have made the necessary preparations will be allowed to enter the Kingdom. Those that are unprepared will be shut out.

B. Significant Elements of the Parable

1. The Wedding

Although it is not directly mentioned, this entire parable is drawn from the illustration of a Jewish wedding.

A wedding was a gala event in those days accompanied by great joy and feasting which could last up to a week. The following are some of the significant elements of Jewish weddings:

- The betrothal, or engagement, took place approximately one year prior to the actual wedding. During this period of time, the couple was considered to be legally married although they had not yet had any physical relations. If either of the couples were unfaithful during this time, it was considered to be an act of adultery. A good example of this in the Bible is Mary and Joseph.
- In the time between the betrothal and the actual wedding, the man would make all necessary preparations for his bride. This would often consist of building a home or engaging in an enterprise that would prove his ability to care for a wife.
- Once all of the necessary preparations were made, the man would travel to the house of the bride and escort her to their new home. This procession would often take place at night which would allow as many people as possible to join in the festivities.
- Once the couple arrived at their new home, a feast would be given to all of the invited guests. This feast would last for at least one day and possibly even for one week.
- At the end of the feast time, the best man would take the hand of the bride and place it into the hand of the groom. After this, everyone would leave.

2. Ten Virgins

The parable centers around ten virgins, five of which were wise and five of which were foolish. These virgins would be a part of the wedding party and were usually close friends of the bride. They would be her "bridesmaids".

Christ states that five of these virgins were wise. The word translated "wise" is *phronimoi* which means "prudent". It could be better translated as thoughtful or prepared. The word translated "foolish" is *moros* which means "mindless". Thus, Christ is drawing a comparison between five virgins who were prepared and five who were unprepared.

The prepared virgins took extra oil in their lamps while the foolish did not. The lamp spoken of here is most likely one that was carried on a pole which had a wick dipped in oil. The foolish virgins had only enough oil to dampen their wicks while the wise had enough for an extended period of time.

Note that all of the virgins slumbered while the bridegroom tarried. What probably occurred from the context of the parable is that the groom had already met his bride and were on their way back to the house where the feast would occur. Since his trip took longer than the virgins expected, they quite naturally fell asleep. (Note that the bridegroom came to them and they went into the house. This seems to indicate that the virgins were near to the place where the feast would be held, which would be the home of the bridegroom).

3. The Bridegroom and Bride

Interestingly, only the bridegroom is mentioned specifically in this parable. This seems to indicate one of the following two things:

1. The bride was with the groom when the wedding party arrived.
2. The bride was in the house where the party was being held.

Since the second option is most unlikely given the wedding customs of those days, it is most likely that what Christ is picturing is the return of the wedding party to the future home of the couple. Although we cannot be dogmatic about this, it makes the most sense from the context.

4. The Feast

Once the wedding party arrived at the home of the groom, all of the guests went into the feast and the door was shut. The festivities officially started at this point. As we have already pointed out above, this feast would often last up to seven days.

5. The Unprepared

Matthew 25:11 gives us the fate of the five foolish virgins. Since they were not part of the attendants when the groom arrived, they were considered as party crashers. As a result, they were shut out of the house.

C. Insignificant Elements of the Parable

1. The Lamps

There are some who try to make the lamps mean something. However, all the lamp does is to reveal the preparedness or unpreparedness of the virgins. It is probably best then to consider the lamp as adding color to the parable and nothing else.

2. The Oil

As with the lamps, there are many who consider the oil to represent the Holy Spirit. Although oil is often used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, it does not have to necessarily have that meaning here. A cleaner interpretation would be to see the oil, and the lamp, as revealing the state of preparedness of the virgins.

However, we must not be too dogmatic on this point. Equating oil with the Holy Spirit does not cause problems in the interpretation of this parable since all true believers must have the Holy Spirit.

D. Interpretation of the Parable

In order to interpret this parable correctly, it is essential to understand the context in which it was given.

Matthew 24 and 25 form what is called Jesus' "Olivet Discourse". This sermon was delivered to the disciples in answer to their two-fold question as record in Matthew 24:3, "when shall these things be?", and "what shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the age?".

IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WE UNDERSTAND THAT THIS PASSAGE, MATTHEW 24 AND 25, DESCRIBE EVENTS DURING THE TRIBULATION TIME IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING CHRIST'S SECOND COMING TO ESTABLISH THE KINGDOM. IN NO WAY DOES THIS PASSAGE REFER TO THE CHURCH. If the above statement is not understood at the outset, it is impossible to correctly interpret any passage in the Olivet Discourse.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is the fifth illustration Christ uses to teach his disciples about the necessity of preparedness. Since his coming will be at an unexpected time, it is essential that any true believer be ready at all times, so that they will be ready at the right time.

The four preceding illustrations depicting the unexpected return of Christ are:

- Matthew 24:32-35 - The Parable of the Fig Tree
- Matthew 24:36-42 - Noah and the Flood
- Matthew 24:43-44 - an unexpected robbery
- Matthew 24:45-51 - a prepared servant

Note that each of these illustrations depict a different aspect of the unexpectedness of Christ's coming:

The Parable of the Fig Tree indicates its nearness when the signs appear.

Noah and the Flood depict the fact that most men will miss the signs of Christ's coming and be suddenly judged just like the world was in the time of Noah.

The unexpected robbery depicts the coming of Christ as being something that a man thinks is possible, but something for which he never prepares himself.

The prepared and unprepared servant indicate that some will know Christ is coming, but because of the delay will become slothful and hence unprepared.

With this background information, we are now ready to interpret this parable.

1. The Wedding

The wedding has no direct interpretation since it serves as the background to this parable. However, its significance consists in the use of its elements to illustrate Christ's return.

2. The Ten Virgins

The ten virgins represent all those who outwardly identify themselves with Christ. In the context of Matthew 24 and 25, they refer specifically to professing believers at the time of Christ's second coming.

It is not correct to use this parable to teach about the imminency of Christ's coming for the Church. The entire context of Matthew 24 and 25 is post-rapture. If we make the virgins refer to professing believers in the Church, then we must logically wind up with a post-tribulation rapture view.

Also note the interesting fact that if we interpret the wedding party as returning from its procession through the town, then the bride is accompanying the bridegroom. Throughout the New Testament, the Church is depicted as the bride of Christ. Therefore, this would most likely picture the return of Christ with his bride to set up the Millennial Kingdom.

The most important thing to note about these ten virgins is that only five of them were actually prepared. All of them knew the general timeframe in which the bridegroom was expected. This fits in harmoniously with the rest of the passage in which Christ is saying time and time again that only the general time of his coming may be known.

Thus we see Christ making the point that only those who are ready immediately prior to his coming will be able to enter the Kingdom. It is not possible to make one's decision for Christ at the Sheep/Goat judgment or the Judgment of the Living Nations. At that time, it will be forever too late.

The key point is "be prepared". Do not let Christ's coming catch you off guard. This is the message of the New Testament. The only way to be prepared at the right time is to be prepared at all times.

3. The Bridegroom and Bride

It should be obvious that the only plausible interpretation as to the identity of the bridegroom and bride is Christ and the Church. This picture is so common throughout the New Testament that we need not develop it here.

4. The Feast

The feast refers to the Millennial Kingdom. Note the following facts:

- The five foolish virgins are shut out of the feast. This occurs in a passage that is warning people to be ready for Christ's coming.
- If the feast is not the Millennial Kingdom, then we are left with no other logical interpretation.
- The picture of the Millennial Kingdom as a feast was a common picture to the rabbis of Christ's day. They often taught that at the start of the Kingdom all of the Jews would sit down with the Messiah at a feast.
- The picture of the Kingdom being a feast is also given in the Parable of the Marriage of the King's Son, and the Parable of the Great Supper.

5. The Unprepared

As we have already noted, the unprepared are shut out of the Kingdom.

This is consistent with the teaching of Matthew 24 and 25. Only those who have made the necessary preparations beforehand will be ready when Christ appears. Once he arrives there will be no chance to become prepared.

One good way to see this is that at Christ's coming all of mankind will be forever fixed as to their destiny. It will be as though every man had died. At this time a man is fixed as to his eternal destiny at the point of death. However, just prior to the Millennial Kingdom, there will be another point of fixation. Only those who are prepared will enter, all others will be cast out.

E. Application of the Parable

Christ's second coming will be at an unexpected time. Only those who have made the necessary preparations beforehand will be allowed to enter the Kingdom. Those who are unprepared will be shut out.