

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/12/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, November 12th

Matthew 25:1-13

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There will come a time when it is too late

In the run up to Advent and the new liturgical year, the final three lectionary Gospel texts of Year A emphasize the end times and the Second Coming. This week's lectionary text addresses the Parable of the Ten Virgins and contrasts the wise and the foolish when it comes to being ready for Christ's return. What does it mean to be ready? Who is wise and who is foolish?

Matthew 25:1-13 Commentary

Chapters 23-25 represent the fifth and final discourse of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. Chapters 24 and 25 specifically deal with end times and the Second Coming. This section includes four teachings that address the coming Kingdom: The Parable of the Faithful Servant (24:45-51), the Parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1-13), the Parable of the Talents (25:14-30) and the discourse on the Final Judgment (25:31-46). The lectionary includes the final three of these teachings spread over three weeks. This week the lectionary addresses the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Collectively these teachings address the need to stay ready for the master's coming and what this entails. All four of these stories are surprising to some modern readers in their harshness of exclusion and judgment.

²⁵ "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom."

In this case, the parable begins with "will" versus "is." The present tense was used in earlier parables to help people to understand the nature of the Kingdom. This suggests the focus here is on the final consummation of the Kingdom and thus a future event.

The custom of the bridal party referenced in this parable is about as alien to those of us in the West as some of our customs surrounding weddings would be to those participating in a first-century Jewish wedding. In Jesus' day, the bridegroom accompanied by a few close friends would leave his home to go to the bride's home. Here there would be various ceremonies. Then, there would be a procession of those invited through the streets at night to his home. Everyone in the procession was expected to carry their own lamp or torch. When the procession reached the bridegroom's house, festivities would begin that lasted for days. The ten unmarried virgins, perhaps bridesmaids, were expecting to meet the bridegroom and join the procession to his house and enjoy the lengthy wedding festivities which could last a week. No lamp meant no admittance.

² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

Unlike in our time where weddings are highly organized affairs, there were no precise timings when the procession was expected. The young women in this parable had to be ready. The lamps or torches would have required oil to be continually lit. Not knowing exactly when the procession would arrive, the wise young women took extra oil with them.

⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps.

As was no doubt typical, the procession was delayed. In this case, "midnight" suggests a long delay. All the young women in this case dozed off. As required, their lamps would have been lit all this time, even if on a low setting. Once the alarm goes out that the procession is approaching, the young women ready themselves and trim their lamps – adjusting the wicks to burn the brightest.

⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ 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 ones (*mōros* – the origin of the word "moron") find their lamps are going out due to lack of oil and they have no extra. They attempt to borrow some oil from the wise ones who had the foresight to bring extra. Due to the extended delay, the wise only had enough for themselves. The wise suggest to the foolish that should go and buy extra oil. While the foolish young women were off trying to locate lamp oil, the procession finally arrives. The wise join in and are admitted to the wedding feast at the bridegroom's house before the door is shut.

¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.'

Only close friends would be admitted, which meant those carrying burning lamps. Once the door was shut, that was it. Nobody else will gain entry. The foolish young women tried to gain admittance, but the bridegroom assumed they were attempting to gatecrash the party, otherwise they would have met the procession with lighted lamps as custom dictated.

¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Verse 13 provides a simple explanation of the parable relative to when the Kingdom will be fully consummated at the return of Christ.

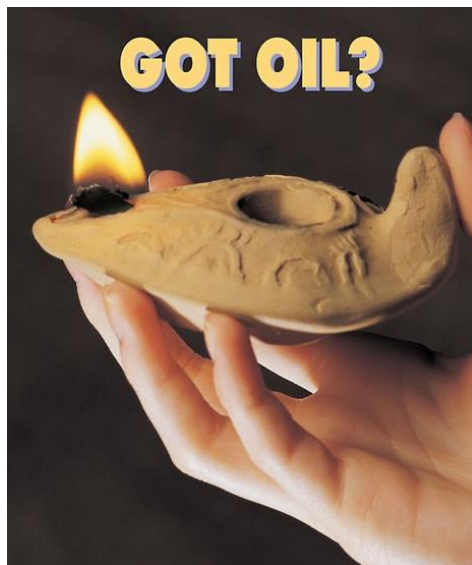
Reflection and Application

Commentators tend to agree that the allegorical elements in this parable are as follows: The ten virgins represent the church waiting for the Second Coming. The bridegroom is Christ. The wedding feast is the great joyous occasion of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9). The delay in the bridegroom's coming represents the unexpected delay that the early church experienced regarding the Second Coming. The bridegroom's arrival at midnight is the actual Second Coming. The closing of the door on the festivities represents final judgment. There seems to be more disagreement over the allegorical significance (if there is any) of the oil. Some argue the oil represents faith, others that it represents good works, piety, or a personal relationship with Christ. None of these can be borrowed, purchased, or made up for at the last minute!

This parable connects with many earlier teachings in Matthew's Gospel. The wise and foolish young women recall the wise and foolish builders towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount (7:24-27) where the wise are those who hear Jesus' words and act on them. Jesus has already referred to Himself as the Bridegroom (9:15) and such recalls the wedding feast to which many are called but few are chosen (22:1-4). In this parable the bridegroom is the judge. The foolish young women cry "*Lord, Lord*" and the bridegroom's response is "*I do not know you.*" Both these responses recall 7:21-23 where Jesus states only those who do the will of the Father will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Preparedness in this parable can perhaps be summarized as following the commands of Christ and being a disciple.

This parable is directed to believers. Both the wise and the foolish young women were expecting the bridegroom but only the wise were prepared. Who are we in this parable? Are we the wise or are we the foolish? Perhaps it is better to think how we all exist somewhere on the spectrum between being foolish and being in a state of readiness. We are in a constant struggle between the world as it is now and the vision for God's rule. This parable encourages us to reflect on which of our daily practices and disciplines prepare us for Christ's return and those that keep us in the world as it is now and thus keep our oil flasks empty.

From our vantage point in salvation history, the Bridegroom is still delayed. Regardless of whether Christ returns in our lifetime, our death will be as final as the Second Coming. After our death, there is nothing else we can do to be ready. This parable thus confronts us with the inevitability of our own death and the need to act today to avoid the tragedy of an unprepared life. For those reading these words, it is not too late to be wise in Christ. However, there will come a time for every one of us when it is too late, and we will eventually be judged as wise or foolish.



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