

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Last Sunday of the Church Year (2023)

Are You Ready to Honor the Groom?

Rev. Toby Byrd

“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.’” (Matthew 25:7–8, ESV)

Today’s Gospel Reading, the parable of the Ten Virgins, provides the reader with a glimpse of the Last Day, the second coming of Jesus, while it also provides us with a vivid picture of our present condition as we struggle through life until the day we close our eyes in death, asking, “Do you live as one of the five **“wise”** virgins, or as one of the five **“foolish”** virgins? Foolish or wise, with or without oil, what will you be like when God comes to reign in Christ in all His fullness? Will you be prepared? For a day will come when we shall all appear before Jesus. So Jesus asks you in the Gospel Reading for today, *“Are You Ready to Honor the Groom?”*

Although this parable is filled with Scriptural truths, it is one of the most misunderstood and allegorized readings in Scripture. Unclear understandings of terms such as, *“The kingdom of heaven,” (Matthew 25:1, ESV)* oil for lamps, who is the bride, and so forth make for some very interesting explanations. As colorful as they are, providing great entertainment, most are not accurate interpretations of the text, and thereby fail to bring God’s people to the core of the text, leading people away from its meaning. So, this morning, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, let us examine what our Lord Jesus is telling us in His parable of the Ten Virgins.

Jesus begins this parable referring to, *“The kingdom of heaven,” (Matthew 25:1, ESV)* and we cannot help but ask, “What is Jesus referring to? Is He referring to some spatial place, such as heaven itself having descended upon the earth, or is He referring to a condition that now exists on the earth. The answer is yes, He is referring to both cases. He is referring to the fact that He, Himself, the Second Person of the Godhead has descended from heaven and brought heaven with Him. He came, to take on our flesh, so He could live among us, and thereby fulfill His earthly ministry, performing the *royal, heavenly* deeds of His heavenly Father, those deeds intended to change the condition of men by the salvific work of Christ.

Cutting to the chase, the parable of the Ten Virgins is about meeting Christ. When He comes, will you be ready? The parable shows us that some were while others were not. Thinking about this, we cannot help but think of the number of times that Jesus comes to us. But before we dwell on that, let's look at the parable itself dividing it into two parts, before the bridegroom comes and after He arrives.

Jesus tells us that there were ***“ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.”*** (Matthew 25:1–2, *ESV*) Ten bridesmaids set out to greet the bridegroom at the place of the marriage feast. It is their way to honor him at his arrival. But they're not sure how long their wait will be. In anticipation of a possible late arrival, they each bring a lamp to light the night. But here the similarity ends. Five of them bring not only a lamp but also extra oil for their lamps. However, the other five do not. Immediately we see the difference. The five with extra oil are the ***“wise”*** ones, while the other five are the ***“foolish.”*** As it turns out, their wait went long into the night. This delay brought on drowsiness and so the ten virgins laid down and slept. Then, at midnight, someone shouts, ***“Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”*** (Matthew 25:6, *ESV*)

Aroused by the shout the virgins began to trim their lamps, but the five who failed to bring extra oil found that their lamps would not light, so they turn to the other five and demand, ***“Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.”*** (Matthew 25:8, *ESV*) They had trimmed the wicks in their lamps, but they wouldn't light because their lamps were out of oil. This posed quite a dilemma. These five ***“foolish”*** virgins wanted to be included in the wedding procession, proceeding with the bridegroom into the wedding hall, but their lamps had no oil and therefore they were unable to light their way. What to do? Well, at least they could ask the other five, the ***“wise”*** virgins if they could have some of their oil.

When they first came to the wedding place, none of them knew exactly how long it would be for the bridegroom to appear, but this did not matter to the five ***“wise”*** virgins for they came prepared. If the bridegroom was delayed, and the night lingered on, they would have extra oil to keep their lamps burning. As it turns out, the extra oil would be necessary, and thus, this did not present a problem. But it did for the ***“foolish”*** ones. Turning to the five ***“wise”*** virgins, demanding some of their oil, they receive an answer they did not expect, ***“The wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’”*** (Matthew 25:9, *ESV*)

Some think the fear of missing the bridegroom makes the five *“wise”* virgins selfish. How could they not help the other five? But this misses the point of the virgins being where they were. Their desire was to meet the bridegroom as He arrived and thereby, honor Him. Therefore, any question of selfishness here misses the point. What matters more than anything is meeting the bridegroom and celebrating appropriately. Nothing could be allowed to jeopardize this most important of events. The *“foolish”* would simply have to fend for themselves, they’ll have to find oil for their lamps elsewhere.

Thus, the whole point of the parable is *“honoring the bridegroom.”* Nothing can be allowed that would place this into jeopardy. Whether the five *“foolish”* found oil or not is beside the point, the point is to honor the bridegroom when the time for honoring Him has arrived!

Honoring the bridegroom in this parable is to speak of honoring Christ: always being ready to honor Him, especially when He comes into your presence. Thus, the parable asks, “Are you like the five *“wise”* virgins always ready to honor Christ, or are you like the five *“foolish”* virgins who are not?”

As I said earlier, this parable is over allegorized, but in explaining it, some allegory is necessary. For instance, what is the oil? Five would have enough for they brought extra, while five would be lacking. How is the “oil” to be applied to our daily living?

Some liken the oil to faith, but to speak of not having enough faith brings into question the words of our Lord Jesus when He said, *“For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”* (Matthew 17:20, ESV) Furthermore, Jesus said the *“grain of [a] mustard seed . . . is the smallest of all the seeds on earth,”* (Mark 4:31, ESV) If faith is compared to the smallest seed on earth, then the smallest faith still saves. So, no, I don’t think the oil of the parable can be compared to faith. I have always looked at the oil as the Word of God, which shows us our Savior and produces faith. For the Word of God, especially the Word of Christ, the Gospel is what produces faith (Rom. 10:17).

Again we recall when our Lord Jesus rebuked His disciples because they failed to cast out a demon from a demon possessed boy. Jesus said to them, they could not cast it out, ***“Because of your little faith.”*** (*Matthew 17:20, ESV*) Jesus had told them that if they have faith, even as small as a mustard seed, they could move mountains, but here He chastises them for their lack of faith. Here Jesus is pointing out a truth which we don't like to hear, the disciples were, and so are we, people who do not always trust God's Word. We ask, how much can I believe the Scriptures? This is the problem of the five ***“foolish”*** virgins, they leaned on their own understanding and therefore, did not honor Christ.

Their reason trumped God's Word and hampered and corrupted their faith. Perhaps they chose to believe in works righteousness rather than the grace of God to forgive sins in the name of His Son, Jesus. Or they chose to rely on their free will, their ability to decide for Christ. Or they turned the Gospel into Law, believing they have a hand, possibly the only hand, in their salvation. Any of these false teachings and many others like them set the individual above God, so that they honor themselves more than God and thereby they violate the First Commandment, and are unprepared to honor Christ when He came.

Jesus tells us the five ***“foolish”*** virgins returned, but it was too late. The bridegroom had come and taken the five ***“wise”*** virgins into the wedding hall with Him and He shut, He closed the door. Barring entry to these five ***“foolish”*** virgins who stand outside, pleading, ***“Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’*** Then Jesus says, ***“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”*** (*Matthew 25:11–13, ESV*)

The implication is clear, you are to *Always Be Ready to Honor the Groom*. But how do you know you're ready? You are ready when God's gift of faith informs you that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are in full control of your future. You are ready when God's gift of faith informs you your salvation was His alone to give to you through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. You had nothing to do with it. You are ready when you, fully immersed in relying on God's Word of Holy Scripture, are led to surrender your eternal future to God rather than the foolish words of men.

The ten virgins represent the entire community of those who claim Christ as their Lord, that is, the Church. The fact that there is division within this community is ample evidence of the truth of the parable of the Ten Virgins. The life of a disciple is characterized by joy and security as well as challenge and spiritual danger. In this parable Jesus is warning His followers to remain vigilant against the possibility of falling away, of being led astray by false teaching and teachers and thereby not being ready or able to Honor the Groom when He Comes.

Jesus gives us ample warning of the unknown time of His arrival on the Last Day, saying, ***“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Matthew 24:36, ESV)*** Again He says, ***“Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Matthew 24:42, ESV)*** And finally He says, ***“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Matthew 24:44, ESV)*** These words also apply to the day and time of your death. For those who think they’re ready but aren’t, He 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.’” (Matthew 7:21–23, ESV)***

Jesus promised that He will return on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead, but we are reminded of another time when Jesus said He will return and be with us in person and that is during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper. St. Luke reminds us that on the last night Jesus was with His disciples, ***“He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Luke 22:19–20, ESV)*** St. Paul reminds us of this same event when he tells the church at Corinth, ***“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”” (1 Corinthians 11:23–25, ESV)*** St. John reminds us that Jesus said, ***“I am the bread that came down from heaven.”” (John 6:41, ESV)*** ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.” (John 6:53–57, ESV)*** Taking offense at these words means you are not honoring the Groom, Jesus Christ.

Three apostles affirm that Jesus is in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine and He is given to us during the distribution of the Lord's Supper. He comes to be with you, to give of Himself, His body, and His blood, at the altar rail. When you come forward to receive the very body and blood of Christ, do you honor Him? As you kneel at the altar rail, are you honoring Him, believing in His true presence while loving and honoring your neighbor. Have you confessed with your mouth that He is present, giving His crucified body and blood to you in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion? Are you reconciled with your neighbor? Have you forgiven them as your Lord has forgiven you? He is offering you His forgiveness in this blessed Eucharist; can you do any less? Or is your lamp empty? Is it without the oil of understanding, without the oil of believing in the very words of Christ?

If so, before you commune return to the well of heavenly knowledge and salvation, return to God's Word of Holy Scripture where you will find an unlimited supply of fuel for your lamp, and unlimited flow of God's grace poured out for you for the sake of the Bridegroom, His Son, Jesus Christ. Return to Holy Scripture which opens the door of knowledge showing you how you can become a true follower of Jesus Christ, who collectively as the Church are His bride, the one to whom He will be coming to take with Him into heaven, into the marriage feast of the Lamb. Return to the neighbor with whom you are not reconciled, forgive, and be reconciled. Or else, be left standing outside, knocking on the door, being refused entry.

Honor the Groom. Honor the One who has redeemed you, a lost and condemned person. Honor the One who has rescued you from all your sins, from death, and the power of the devil with His precious blood and His innocent suffering and death on the Altar of the Cross. Honor the One who honors you with His presence and His forgiveness. Honor Jesus Christ, your Savior and Redeemer who promises you life eternal in heaven. *Honor the Groom.* In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.