

## SERMON NOTES

Great Tuesday

Synaxis Gospel  
Matthew 25:1-13

### PREPARED FOR THE COMING OF CHRIST

#### INTRODUCTION

Our reading for today presents us with a parable told by Jesus two or three days before His crucifixion. It was told to His disciples, whether to only the twelve, or to His wider group of disciples, we do not know. We do know that the setting was the Mount of Olives and this parable was a part of the larger teaching known as the Olivet Discourse.

The Olivet Discourse is the last large block of teaching of our Lord recorded in Matthew, and is in response to a question from the disciples concerning the end of the age, and the return of Christ as the King to establish His kingdom. The discourse is full of warnings for the disciples to be ready and prepared for that great day. This little parable, “the Parable of the Ten Virgins,” occurs somewhere in the middle of those warnings and is told to illustrate the danger of being unprepared.

#### SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 25:1-13

*“Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom.*

*And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.*

*Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’*

*Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’*

*But the prudent answered, saying, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'*

*And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut.*

*And later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, open up for us.' But he answered and said, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'*

*Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day and the hour."*

## NOTES

**“Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom.**

Jesus has been discussing the return of the King and what it will be like at that time. It will be a time of separation of the faithful servants from the unfaithful servants. This parable is one of the illustrations he used.

We have no information about a custom of virgins (plural) awaiting the coming of the bridegroom in first century Israel. We do know that it was the custom for the bride to wait expectantly for her bridegroom to come for her, as in modern Jewish weddings, to complete the wedding and its festivities. There is no mention of the bride in this parable in most of the manuscripts. However the Armenian Bible and some other ancient documents read that the virgins went out to meet the bridegroom *and the bride*.<sup>1</sup>

Most readers assume that the ten virgins belonged to the entourage of the bride, but it is just as possible that they belonged to the entourage of the groom. If so, they had a responsibility to be ready when he appeared to play their part in the wedding custom. Since there is no mention of the bride, possibly the bridegroom is about to make his way to her house—accompanied by his friends and the virgins carrying lanterns or torches—to bring her to his father’s home for the wedding celebration. Or possibly they were to await the bridegroom’s return to welcome him home with his bride.

However it may have been, the story is told assuming the listeners knew the custom. The point being that the ten girls had the responsibility to meet the bridegroom when he appeared, and that they should have their lanterns or torches burning brightly.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the apparatus to Matthew 25:1 in the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1991) p. 71, these also include the uncials D from the 5<sup>th</sup> century and θ from the 9<sup>th</sup> century which witness “and the bride,” as do the early versions in Syriac and Middle Egyptian. My copy of the Armenian Bible written in Krapar reads “and the bride” in Matthew 25:1. However, on the basis of sometimes better witnesses, such as A, B, L, W, Z, 0249, f13, and the Majority text, Nestle-Aland has not included “and the bride” in the text.

And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.

Foolish, as used here, is the opposite of prudent or sensible. Five of the young women were not sensible, but five were sensible. This difference between the young women was demonstrated by their preparedness or lack thereof. The sensible ones were prepared for any eventuality. The foolish were not prepared for a long delay in the arrival of the bridegroom. At the beginning of the evening, one could not distinguish the sensible from the foolish. They all had their lanterns or torches burning brightly. But the wise had brought extra oil, just in case there was a delay, so that they could replenish their torches and fulfill their responsibility. The foolish did not so prepare.

Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

During the delay, the young women all—both the wise and the foolish—fell asleep. They are not faulted for this. They awoke at the summons and found their lanterns (or torches) sputtering out.

Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’

They all got up at the shout and began preparing (trimming) their lamps so that they would burn brightly. It is at this point that the difference between the young women became apparent. The foolish were unprepared to fulfill their responsibility. They attempted to rectify the situation by seeking to borrow from those who were prepared.

But the prudent answered, saying, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

It was not possible to borrow; the wise could not share because they had prepared only enough for themselves. The wise could only advise the foolish to do what they themselves had done beforehand. “Go to the suppliers and purchase oil for yourselves.”

And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut.

The foolish took the advice of the wise, but it was too late. They missed the opportunity of meeting the bridegroom with bright torches. They missed their opportunity to fulfill their responsibility. Only the ones who had prepared, and so, were able to fulfill their responsibility to welcome the bridegroom joined him at the wedding feast. All others were locked out. The closed door separated the included from the excluded.

And later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, open up for us.’ But he answered and said, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’

Though the foolish virgins cried out, “Lord, Lord” it was too late. They had missed their opportunity to welcome him, and now they were to him as strangers, excluded from the wedding feast with all that it might have meant for them in the custom of the day.

## APPLICATION

On this Great Tuesday, as we approach, in a few days, the remembrance of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of our Lord, we also remember His concerns, during that week, for those He was about to leave behind. Jesus knew that, after His Ascension, the time would be long before His return to establish His kingdom. The disciples needed to be prepared for that long wait, so that when the future great day finally arrives, they would be ready.

It was probably on Tuesday of that week that Jesus told the parable of our reading. It was one of many examples of the dangers of being unprepared for our Lord's second coming to this earth. Another example was the people of Noah's day—they had gone on with their daily routines, blithely ignoring the warnings of Noah who was preparing the Ark for the day when the flood would come. When the day came, and Noah and all who entered the Ark were safely inside, God shut the door. Then it was forever too late for all the others. Other examples were of servants who were either faithful or unfaithful while their master was away. Upon his return, the faithful were rewarded, but the unfaithful were separated out and punished.

In the "Parable of the Ten Virgins" we do not have enough information about the culture of that day to be able to say exactly what the role of the virgins was—except that they obviously had the responsibility to meet the bridegroom with brightly burning torches. In a similar way to the faithful and unfaithful servants of the other examples, the young women who fulfilled their duty of lighting the way with their torches joined the wedding celebration; the ones who did not fulfill their duty were shut out.

Five of the young women were foolish, in that they had not prepared themselves for the long wait by having on hand extra oil for their torches. And so, when the moment came to do their duty, they could not. Their companions, on the other hand, had made provision for the possibility of a long wait. They had brought along extra oil to replenish their own needs, and so, with their brightly burning torches, they had entered the home of the bridegroom for the celebration of his wedding.

Readers of this parable have sought to find symbols in the all important oil. What is it in the Christian's life that cannot be given to someone else? I suggest that it is one's personal faith in Jesus Christ that leads to a life of devoted service to God. A godly parent cannot give this faith to a beloved child. The parent can teach, but the faith must be the child's. A godly priest cannot give his personal faith to his congregation. He can only teach and pray that the people themselves respond to God's gracious offer of salvation, preparing themselves, in this way, for Christ's return. The faith cannot in any way be inherited from godly ancestors; it must be the individual's personal response to God. "**Today** is the day of salvation;"<sup>2</sup> when He returns, it will be too late, and God will separate forever His own from all others.

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2

Jesus did not explain the parable or assign any symbolism to it, and so perhaps we should leave the interpretation to his reason for telling it—his concern that when He returns there will be those who have sat under the teaching of His Word that will be unprepared. He knew on that Tuesday, long ago, what awaited Him; He was prepared to face the brutality and the horrible death on the Cross to make possible their—and our—salvation. His thoughts were for us. Are our thoughts for Him? Are we prepared to meet Him, even if the delay is long?

We know that it is our Lord's desire that He find us all prepared, waiting expectantly with devotion for His return. May His coming be a day of rejoicing for us all!