

## Here Comes the Bridegroom

Matt. 25:1-13

**Intro.** Have you ever been shut out or had a door slammed in your face. Last November I went into full panic mode when I missed my scheduled return flight from Moscow to New York. Somehow I had spent the lay-over time waiting in line at the wrong Delta ticket kiosk. I hurried to the right kiosk and waited in line again only to learn that boarding for that flight had closed. In Russia, “closed means like slammed tight!” After the week of teaching and preaching, it was Tuesday morning. Peggy missed me terribly, don’t you know? I was anxious and ready to be home, yet Delta said there were no available seats until Thursday afternoon. Did you ever try to convey urgency with somebody who doesn’t speak your language and someone who doesn’t look away from a monitor? It’s very unsatisfying. All the agent could say was, “da” which means “yes” in Russian. Very unsatisfying!

By God’s grace, I was able to make a Russian Aeroflot flight that arrived in New York about an hour after my original flight was scheduled to arrive. I had to buy a new ticket at considerable cost. Though I barely made the flight from New York to Detroit, I survived the ordeal.

But not every traveler has a second chance like I did. And maybe in life, you’ve realized that not every situation offers a second chance...a do over...a mulligan. Though we wish we could turn back the clock or have another swing of the bat, we can’t... it’s over and done and we have to live with the consequences. At the end of their lives I’m sure many wish they had responded to God’s Spirit when He seemed to be speaking to them...but the opportunity passed. Now in their hour of crisis, God seems distant and silent. That’s how it will be for millions when Jesus returns. Just as it was when God shut the door on Noah’s ark, those who refuse to believe will be forced to remain outside. Those who ignored Jesus and rejected the salvation He offers will have no second chance after He returns to earth. This is why Jesus placed such emphasis on the need to be prepared for His coming. The central life application of **Matt. 24, 25** urges us to be watchful and ready because no one knows **the day or the hour** when our Lord will come. If a second chance was possible or available, Jesus would have said so. But because that hour is final and a day is coming when the door will close, Jesus employed a series of parables to help His readers grasp the urgency of the situation.

This encouragement to be ready for His return continues from **chap. 24** to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in **Matt. 25:1-13**. In **v.10** the parable includes these sobering words...**And the door was shut**. When Jesus returns, the opportunity to trust Him and be saved will have ended. The door opened wide today will be shut and no one else will be permitted to enter His kingdom. The day of the Lord’s favor will have run its long course and the judgment of the nations will commence. Pastor Keegan has already read the passage for us, so let me begin with some background information.

**1. The Jewish Betrothal** - To understand the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, we need to consider the unique marriage customs practiced in the Middle East. The parable Jesus gave is set against a backdrop of customs that were entrenched and well understood by His Jewish audience, but less understood by us in the West.

The marriage of a young man and woman was typically arranged by their parents. Remarkably and counter intuitively, separation was rare. The groom and his parents would travel to the home of the bride to be. There an arrangement was made with the bride’s father and the dowry was paid. In the presence of their parents, the young couple would recite vows and pledge themselves to each other. The marriage covenant was ratified and sealed as the couple drank wine from the same cup. From that moment, they were husband and wife even though their marriage was not yet physically consummated. The couple was betrothed or engaged. But unlike engagements in the west, the marriage was legal and the covenant that bound them could be annulled only by divorce. This was the situation with Joseph and Mary at the time of the nativity.

The bridegroom would then return to his father's house where he would engage in gainful employment while preparing living accommodations for he and his wife. This period when the groom and his bride were separated could last as long as a year. Then without advance notice, the night would come when he and his friends would travel to the home of his bride and take her to the place set apart for their wedding celebration...either at his father's house or some larger hall. His midnight arrival would be heralded by the words, "**Here comes the bridegroom.**" Upon hearing this shout, the bridesmaids would get dressed, grab their lamps and join the bridegroom and his bride and entourage headed for the marriage celebration. It was all very exciting and festive! Arriving at the designated location, the groom and his bride would enter the Chuppah and physically consummate their marriage. This imagery is employed in **Ps.19:4, 5** where the psalmist wrote, **In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.** A celebration the whole town was invited to attend would then begin. The celebration could last an entire week!

It's fascinating to see Christ's redemption illustrated by these Jewish marriage customs. Like the bridegroom, Jesus came from His Father's place in heaven to earth, the home of His bride to be. On the cross, He paid the price necessary to redeem sinners and make us His bride. After the new covenant in His blood was ratified, Jesus returned to His father's home to prepare a place for us. We celebrate this new covenant each time we gather around the Lord's Table. There we remember our bridegroom until He comes. On a day and hour not known by anyone, Jesus will return in the clouds to take all who believe and are saved to be with Him forever. Everyone who trusts Jesus to save them is included in this diverse group of believing sinners He calls His Bride...the Church. Even though we haven't actually seen Jesus or been with Him, by faith we belong to Him and He belongs to us forever. According to our understanding of NT promises, the punishments of the Tribulation will be unleashed on earth while the marriage celebration takes place in heaven. At the end of the 7 yr. Tribulation, Jesus and His Bride will return to earth. Once again, the imagery drawn from the Jewish marriage customs is very precise, tender and beautiful. Like the foolish and wise virgins, some will be ready for Christ's return and some will not.

**2. The Foolish and Wise Bridesmaids - vs. 1-5 - "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.**

The words, "**At that time**", connect this parable to the events prophesied in **Matt. 24** where Jesus answered the question His disciples asked in **24:3** - "**Tell us,**" they said, "**when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?**" Rather than naming a date, Jesus described conditions and signs that would unfold during the time of Tribulation that will precede His coming. Now in **Matt. 25** Jesus adds detail to what it will be like at the end of the age. Because of these things, the need to be ready is urgent. Even though this isn't our mail and these words were spoken primarily for the benefit of unbelievers not removed from earth by the rapture, these teachings have strong application for everyone on this side of Christ's return.

So, **At that time**...says Jesus, **the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.** Notice the bride isn't mentioned in this parable. This is because the Bride of Christ or the Church was still a "mystery" when Jesus spoke these words. The Church was a reality revealed to and through the Apostles at a later time. As promised in several NT passages, when Christ returns to earth, His bride, the Church will come with Him. An example is **Col. 3:4** - **When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.** So the central figure here is not the bride but the **bridegroom.**

Unless the bridegroom plans to marry himself, there has to be a bride even though she remains in the shadows and isn't mentioned. The **ten virgins** hear the shout, '**Here's the bridegroom!** They wake up, get dressed, take their lamps and go out to meet the bridegroom with his bride. Throughout the Bible and in Jewish thinking, **ten** represents *completion* or *totality*. An example would be the *Ten Commandments* and the fact that *ten Jewish residents* were required to establish a synagogue in a given city. The fact that there were **ten** may be a hint that Jesus was comparing these unmarried maidens to the total number of Tribulation survivors alive on earth at that time.

The parable says **five** or half of this total number were **foolish** and the other half were **wise**. Now remember, according to marriage customs in the Middle East, the bridegroom typically came for his bride at night. Wedding celebrations that began late at night continued into the new day. In the darkness of night, the **lamps** were functionally necessary. But like the mystique of a candlelight service, these luminaries advertized the glory of the event itself. The **foolish** virgins took lamps, but they brought no supply of oil. The **wise** virgins brought jars of oil along with their lamps.

A variety of interpretations are offered for who and what is represented by the virgins, the lamps, and the oil. Like parables where Jesus didn't interpret the elements, the essential meaning can suffer damage when the details are pushed too hard. But having said that...the details are not insignificant...we just have to be careful. In keeping with the purpose of a parable, the best interpretation is often the simplest one. And the simplest interpretation is the one that answers to the main point which is stated in **v.13** - "**Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.**"

Let me suggest a few points that seem rather obvious. *First*, the orientation of this parable is Jewish. It's framed around Jewish marriage customs. *Second*, the **ten virgins** are not the bride. There is only one bride, not ten. So they must not refer to the Church which is later declared to be the bride of Christ. *Third*, the **ten virgins** would seem to be attendants or bridesmaids...in other words, they represent a distinct group selected to accompany the bride and groom. *Fourth*, in keeping with the main point in **v.13**, the **foolish virgins** were neither watchful nor prepared for the bridegroom's coming. Like the one pictured on the screen, the lamp in their hands was useless when it ran out of oil. So the foolish virgins represent those who believe the bridegroom is coming, but aren't ready when He does come. Because preparedness represents something so entirely essential, those who were unprepared were shut out of the marriage celebration and the kingdom.

On the other hand, the **wise virgins** were watchful and prepared. **v.5** says, **The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.** Notice that all **ten virgins** fell asleep when the bridegroom's coming was delayed. The fact that they fell asleep wasn't meant to be an indictment against them. The bridegroom came at midnight just as the Son of Man will come as a thief in the night. The only ones I know who are awake after midnight are teenagers and college kids. If you're parent of a young person in that category, their sleep habits or lack thereof, can make you crazy! Am I right about that? You find yourself living your schedule plus theirs. Now remember, because **no one knows the day or the hour and the Lord will come at a time when He's not expected**, these virgins had no legitimate reason to stay awake that night or any other night. The misguided Millerites who waited on mountain and rooftops were wrong on several counts. These virgins became drowsy and were asleep because it was the time when people in their right minds are sleeping. So the fact that they were fast asleep is no indictment against them...it simply underscores the fact that Christ's return will be unexpected.

Yet the bridegroom **was a long time in coming**. The natural tendency in all of us is to become spiritually drowsy and to fall asleep with respect to Christ's promise to return. In keeping with Jewish expectation, the Messiah will come at midnight when many people are sleeping. But listen, even believers who are physically asleep when Jesus comes, can still be spiritually awake and alert.

And this is what matters. Churches that avoid prophecy and any mention of Christ's promise to return are spiritually asleep. Believers who profess to believe in Jesus yet live without a sense of intentionality and expectancy are asleep. Because nearly 2,000 years have passed since Jesus ascended to the right hand of His Father in heaven, His delay has lulled some into spiritual coma. To believers in this condition Paul wrote, **The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. - Rom. 13:11** Again to the Church in Ephesus he wrote **"Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." - Eph. 5:14** So without pushing the details too hard, the virgins seem to represent those who serve like bridesmaids. They are specifically called by God's grace to participate in the wedding festivities. And as Jesus said earlier, **"many are called but few are chosen."**

A well studied conclusion is that these ten virgins represent survivors in Israel who believe their Messiah is coming. But like many in Israel when Jesus came the first time, they're not spiritually prepared to meet Him even though John the Baptist prepared the way. Their heart condition is like seed that fell on shallow soil in the parable of the sower. Their profession is shallow and perhaps more religious and nationalistic than spiritual. They earnestly desire the kingdom, but they haven't met the King. Though the passage doesn't interpret the meaning of the **oil**, in the OT, olive oil is frequently a symbol of the Holy Spirit. So the oil may represent the indwelling presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the five wise virgins. As taught in both testaments, salvation involves more than mental assent or profession. It involves more than raising a hand / walking an aisle / or signing a card. Salvation is a miracle of God's grace that involves inner spiritual regeneration by the Holy Spirit. And genuine salvation will result in a changed life. The oil or presence of God's Spirit in these wise virgins is the source of their light or visible testimony. So according to the parable, the foolish virgins had not experienced the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit. Like Nicodemus, they were religious but not born again. Even today, many religious people exist in this category.

**3. The Arrival of the Bridegroom - vs. 6-10a - "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' "'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived.**

The comparison of Christ to a **bridegroom** was first made by Jesus when the Pharisees asked Him why His disciples didn't practice fasting like the Pharisees. **Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. - Mk. 2:19, 20.** This imagery is carried further by the parable in **Matt. 22** where Jesus said, **"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for His Son."** And let me throw in this tidbit in at no extra cost...the various parables of Jesus are like a mosaic. When taken together they present, not a series of random ideas, but a harmonious unified message. As Paul wrote, God is not the author of confusion nor did Jesus intend to mystify us by parables whose meaning is cryptic and impossible to grasp. Like the parable of **Matt. 22**, the King's Son who is about to celebrate his marriage, is Jesus, the bridegroom here in **Matt. 25**. And we can be certain of this... the love Jesus has for His bride and for each believing sinner in particular is far greater than any mortal bridegroom who is head over heels in love! Jesus suffered and died for that day when our eyes will finally gaze into His and we are taken to be with Him forever.

So at midnight the cry rang out. **'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'** From the divine viewpoint, all creation has been waiting for this moment. **Rom. 8:19 - The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.**

Notice **all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps**. But the lamps of the foolish virgins flickered and were about to go out. Their lamps were running out of oil and they had no supply. They had some truth and some light. They may have exhibited an outward form of godliness. They even had a sense of expectation and believed their Messiah was coming. But their lamps were not adequately fueled. The testimony of their lives was not energized by God's Spirit. They had religion without a living relationship with the risen Christ. They were awakened by the signs and reality of His coming but they were not prepared. They were like so many in Israel and the world today.

So, **The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'** **"No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'** I know what you're thinking...you're thinking the **wise virgins** behaved selfishly! They had extra oil but refused to share it with anybody. But they weren't selfish, they simply illustrate a spiritual reality...a fact. The oil or the energizing presence of God's Spirit is not transferrable. In other words, no human being can give you salvation and you can't get it online. God may use somebody who preaches or shares the Gospel...another human being may influence you to consider Christ and tell you how to be saved. But salvation and the Holy Spirit are gifts that can only be received from God on the basis of personal faith. This is why Jesus often said, **Come to Me**. My disciples are a great bunch of guys, but they can't do for you what I can do.

The wise virgins then said, **Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves**. Some read this and object saying, *"salvation and the Holy Spirit are not for sale. Therefore, the oil cannot refer to salvation or the regenerating work of God."* This objection seems to make sense but it overlooks the language of the Bible. For example, speaking to Israel, the Lord said in **Isa. 55:1** - **"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."** Here and in several other passages the Lord offers salvation and spiritual satisfaction as a free gift purchased **without money** and **without cost** to the purchaser. That's different, isn't it? To **buy** spiritual treasure appears in the same sense in **Rev.3:18** where Jesus said to the church of Laodicea...**I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. To buy** in this biblical sense means *to procure or to obtain by faith*. But time had run out for the foolish virgins. At midnight the shops were closed. The opportunity to trust Christ, receive the supply of His Spirit and power to live for Him had passed. Christ came as promised but these foolish virgins were unsaved and spiritually unprepared to meet Him.

**4. The Wedding Banquet – vs. 10b-12 - The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'**

The **wise virgins** represent people who are saved / indwelt / and empowered by God's Spirit. They were **ready**. They enter the wedding banquet with Jesus. Notice, **The virgins who were ready went in with him**. Remember, the focus is the **bridegroom**. In the primary sense the wise represent the believing who have survived the Tribulation. They are prepared by virtue of lives illumined and changed by God's presence in them. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus twice tells us who the kingdom of heaven belongs to. He said, **"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** And...**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** - **Matt. 5:3, 10** He said the kingdom belongs to those who like little children are humbled by their sinful inadequacy / simple / and willing to trust Him to save and make them righteous. Believers like this are represented by the **wise virgins** given access to His kingdom. They are prepared, not by self-effort, but by the saving grace of God. They have received the righteousness of faith which is like the wedding garment furnished by the King in the parable of **Matt. 22**.

But notice...the foolish virgins who showed up with neither oil nor lighted lamps, are shut out. Though they plead for the door to be opened, it's too late. The door is shut permanently. For the unbelieving **at that time** when Christ returns, there remains no second chance. Their religious participation can't get them in. Their nationalistic aspirations can't gain them entry. Their improved living can't open the door. Even belief their Messiah is coming hasn't prepared them. Saving faith in Jesus Christ is the only way in. The only way to be prepared for Christ's return is to confess your sin and to trust Jesus to save you and give you the power to do His will. As Dwight L. Moody said long ago, "*Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.*" The indictment against the foolish virgins is simply this...they were unprepared. They weren't ready.

Appealing to the bridegroom they say, '**Sir! Sir!**' they said. '**Open the door for us!**' **"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'** These words should remind us of **Matt. 7:21- 23**. Jesus said, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'**

**5. The Bottom Line - v. 13 - "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.** Like a mosaic, let me piece together the tiles of truth presented in the parables of **Matt. 24, 25**.

1. *Christ's delay will be long* – like the Master who gave his servants certain responsibilities and went away for a long time, and like the bridegroom who was a long time coming.
2. *Christ's return will be sudden and unexpected* – like a thief in the night and like the flood of Noah's day which came while people were eating, drinking and marrying. In addition, Jesus said some will be sleeping in their beds and others will be busy at their work.
3. *Christ's judgment will be irreversible* – like the door on Noah's ark and the gates in a Russian airport...at a time known only to God the Father Jesus will return and salvation's door will be shut tight. There will be no second chance and purgatory is a myth of convenience.
4. *Our hearts will be exposed* – In **I Sam. 16:7** the prophet said, "**Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.**" Though these parables focus on what people are doing when Jesus comes, we know He sees the motives and the intentions behind them all. He recognizes faith when it's present and when it's absent. He knows why the Master's servant was unfaithful and why the five virgins were foolish and unprepared.
5. *Each person will stand alone* – We see this illustrated by the lone servant who was unfaithful and by Christ's varied response to servants in the parable of the talents. (that's next Sunday.)
6. *We must be prepared* – Let me simply remind you of the emphasis in these parables.
  - **24:42 - "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.**
  - **24:42 - So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.**
  - **25:13 - "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.**

Through the PA system of the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, a monotonous message is played every time somebody approaches the end of their traveller or moving walkway. "*Mind your step*"... "*Mind your step*"... "*Mind your step*"... "*Mind your step*." Unless you have a long layover and become entirely tone deaf to that recording, you get the message...airport security doesn't want you to stumble when you reach the end of the traveller. Though many ignore Christ's teachings and warnings, there will be an end to this present age and a moment when Jesus Christ will return to earth. There will be an end to the opportunity to be saved by trusting Jesus. With impassioned urgency, Jesus says, **Keep watch and be ready, because you do not know the day or the hour.**" Are you ready?

**Rev. 19:9 - Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God."**