

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS

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### Matthew 25:1-13

The theme of separating the good from the bad is a frequent theme of the parables. Remember the Parable of the Tares where there is mention of the 'good' wheat and the 'bad' tares. In the Parable of the Dragnet, Jesus spoke about sorting out the 'good' fish from the 'bad' fish. Today we are going to talk about 'good girls' and 'bad girls,' or more exactly about 'wise virgins' and 'foolish virgins' in the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Let us read Matthew 25:1-13.

*Matthew 25:1. Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.*

*2 Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish.*

*3 Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them,*

*4 but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.*

*5 But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.*

*6 And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'*

*7 Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.*

*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, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.'*

*10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.*

*11 Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!'*

*12 But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'*

*13 Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.*

This parable begins with the word 'then,' a small but important word. *Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ...* The word 'then' brings us to the time referred to at the end of the preceding chapter, Matthew 24:50-51. This is what we read.

*Matthew 24:50. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know,*

*51 and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.*

Where do hypocrites go? At a place where 'men will weep and gnash their teeth.' In other words, the hypocrites are sentenced to hell, a place where people will express their extreme despair by weeping and gnashing their teeth. Then, at that time, at the time of the judgment that I just talked about, Jesus says, 'the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten virgins.'

Notice that the parable has to do with something in the future. The kingdom of God shall be compared to... It is a characteristic of Jesus' teaching that He sometimes speaks of the kingdom being present in His ministry and yet, at other times, He asks his disciples to pray for a future kingdom. *Your kingdom come*, we read in Matthew 6:10. In one sense, the kingdom of God had already come in Jesus' earthly ministry. But in another sense, it is still to come.

## **A picture of Christians**

Now in this parable, who are the virgins? Who do they represent? "Virgins" are a picture of the people of God, of the church, of Christians. For example, in 2Corinthians 11:2, Paul speaks about presenting the church as a 'pure virgin' to Christ. *I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure **virgin** to him.* The church is the virgin who is being presented to one husband, Christ. In Revelation 14:4, the word 'virgin' is applied to people who have not defiled themselves with women. *These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are **virgins**. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.* This is a description of a true believer: 1) he follows God wherever He goes; 2) he was redeemed from among men; 3) he is the firstfruits to God. So a virgin is a picture of a Christian.

In our story, we have ten virgins. All ten virgins are Christians. We cannot say that five were Christians, and five were not Christians. They all had lamps. All their lamps were shining. They were all invited to attend the wedding. They all went to the wedding.

Another important point to observe is that all ten of them fell asleep. V.5: *They all slumbered and slept.* This is puzzling. The Lord Jesus just spoke about wakefulness and the crucial importance of staying awake. Matthew 24:42: *Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.* And what happens to these ten virgins? They all fall asleep! How can it be that if all of them fall asleep, five of them can still be called wise? Paul tells us that it is those who are in the darkness who fall asleep. Those who are in the light, they stay awake (1Thessalonians 5). How can there be five wise virgins and five foolish virgins? We should have a parable of ten foolish virgins!

The question we need to ask is this: what is the meaning of this 'sleeping'? What does it mean that the virgins 'slumbered and slept'? 'Sleeping' in the parable can mean only one of two things. Either it means the opposite of wakefulness, of spiritual wakefulness. Or it literally means to die. These are the two basic meanings of 'sleep' in the NT. If this 'sleep' were a spiritual sleep, then none of the virgins could be called wise. You cannot be wise if you are in a state of spiritual lethargy. We are left then with the other option and we come to the conclusion that 'sleep' here means 'death,' physical death, the death that overtakes believers before the coming of Christ. Notice again that no fault is attached to the wise virgins for falling asleep. Therefore the only way to understand this parable is to conclude that the reference to 'sleep' in v. 5 and 'rising' in v. 7 is literal. They are not metaphors for death and resurrection. They refer to physical death and physical resurrection. All ten virgins died. As the Lord's coming was delayed, they were not physically alive at His return. They all died. Just as through the last 2000 years, Christians have died. The Lord has not come in their lifetime. They were hoping that He would come, but He did not come. His coming was delayed. And in the meantime, they died.

## **1Thessalonians 4**

Now let's get deeper into this topic of falling asleep. There is a passage in 1Thessalonians which is very close to the Parable of the Ten Virgins. This is what Paul writes in 1Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1Thessalonians 4:13. *But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are (notice the word) **asleep**, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*

14 *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have (notice again the term) fallen **asleep**.*

15 *For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have (again the word) fallen **asleep**.*

16 *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the **archangel's call**, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first;*

17 *then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to **meet** the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.*

18 *Therefore comfort one another with these words.*

The word 'asleep' is repeated three times in this passage (vv. 13, 14, 15). Paul is saying to the Thessalonian Christians, 'Concerning our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep, i.e., who have physically died, I don't want you to grieve as those who don't have any hope.'

Apart from the word 'asleep,' notice two other terms. The 'archangel's call,' or voice (v. 16). The cry of the archangel. And then the word 'meet' in v. 17. *Together with them in the clouds to **meet** the Lord in the air.*

All these words in 1Thessalonians 4, all these ideas are also present in our parable. The ten virgins have fallen asleep. Then in v. 6, at midnight, there comes the cry, just like the call of the archangel. It is this cry that wakes up the virgins. *But at midnight there was a **cry**, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'*

Notice also the word 'rise.' In 1Thessalonians, we have, *the dead in Christ will **rise** first.* In Matthew 25, Jesus said, *all those virgins **rose**.* Another point of similarity.

So there is a cry. Then there is the rising in response to the cry. Then what happens? There is a meeting with Christ. They ***meet the Lord in the air*** (in 1Thessalonians). They *go out and **meet him*** (in Matthew 25). You see, it is almost as though Paul is deliberately referring to the Parable of the Ten Virgins when he wrote 1Thessalonians 4.

This parable has to do with Christians, Christians who have died at the time of the Lord's coming. And it is the cry of the archangel that wakes them up. This is not a spiritual waking up. It is a waking up from a physical death. They do not wake up before the coming of the Lord, but at the coming of the Lord, which makes it even more clear that the reference is to a physical resurrection.

## **The oil**

Once we see these things, we can begin to put the other parts of the parable together. The next key point is the idea of being ready. Look at the conclusion of the parable, v. 13: ***Watch** therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.* The question here is, how do you watch? Because you cannot really watch when you are asleep. Well, the parable says that you can watch by being ready. Verse 10: *And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and **those who were ready** (the wise virgins) went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut.* Notice that only those who were ready went to the wedding feast. How were they ready? Not by staying awake. The parable says that they were asleep. They were ready because they had extra oil. That is how the wise virgins were ready.

Now everything hinges on our interpretation of this 'extra oil.' Here we must understand the matter very accurately.

Let's look at the picture again. There are ten virgins. All of them fall asleep. Then at midnight, there was a cry that said, *Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him* (v. 5). *Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps* (v. 6).

The lamp that the virgins are holding is basically a metal bowl on top of which there is a piece of cloth or rope, which serves as a wick. This wick is immersed in the oil. So when you light a lamp oil, you actually light that wick. It begins to burn because of the oil that is soaked up into this rope. With time, the wick gets burned and it begins to become black. When there is too much black on it, the light will become dimmer because the oil does not burn as efficiently. So it is time to trim it, i.e. you cut away that burned out part. That new wick can soak out more oil and therefore can give a brighter light.

When the foolish virgins wanted to trim their wick, they realized that they do not have much oil left. It is not that they are out of oil, but they are beginning to run out of oil at that particular time. Their lamp had been burning while they were sleeping. It was still burning when they woke up. And as they trimmed the wick of their lamp, they looked inside the bowl and saw that they are almost out of oil. What does that mean?

I remind you that the ten virgins represent Christians, Christians who have died. Their lights have been shining during their time on earth. If you are a Christian, your lamp has been lit. As the Lord Jesus said, 'No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bed' (Luke 8:16). Or puts it somewhere it cannot be seen. When you light a lamp, you want the light to shine and to be seen.

In the Bible, the lamp often symbolizes salvation. In Isaiah 62:1, we read about 'the lamp of salvation that is burning.' *For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a lamp that burns.* Salvation is symbolized by a burning lamp.

### **Carrying extra oil**

So the Christian has this lamp of salvation that is burning. And throughout his lifetime, by the grace of God, it will continue to burn until he dies. Then, when the Lord Jesus comes back, there will be the shout of the archangel which will wake us up. We will be resurrected. At that point, we are going to trim our lamp to make it bright again. And some are going to discover, to their dismay, that their light is going out because they are running out of oil.

What does that mean? For some who will rise to meet the Lord, it will be a dreadful day. They will suddenly realize that they do not have enough oil, and they will say to their neighbors, 'Please, give me some of your oil.' But that oil cannot be shared, even if you wanted to give it away.

Look again at the situation. The wise virgins have stored up something extra. And they have stored it up, not for use at this present time, but for use in the time to come. Remember what we said when we studied Luke 16:8. *The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.* The sons of this age, of this world, they are wiser in their generation than the sons of light. What does that mean? You see, the sons of this world, the non-Christians, they are wiser in the sense that they make better preparation for their future in this world than many sons of light. Many Christians make poor preparation for their eternal future.

The foolish virgins were satisfied that their lamps were burning at this present time. They never thought about the possibility of the Lord's coming being delayed. They never worried about that. They made no provision for the future. It was sufficient for this present age, when they were still alive, in this present world. But it was not sufficient for the age to come. That is the point of the parable. The wise virgins made preparation for the coming age. They made good preparation for their eternal

future. The foolish virgins did not. They were living for this age. They did not live for the age to come.

There is the difference between being spiritually minded and being carnally minded. The spiritually minded person, because of his faith, knows that the age to come is a reality. The carnally minded person is interested only in the present. The age to come is too remote to be of interest for him.

The spiritual Christian lives in terms of eternity. Not only he knows he has a very long future, he is prepared for that eternal future. The carnal Christian does not live with eternity in mind. He lives only for today. And therefore, he is not prepared for the age to come. The Lord Jesus said, 'Do not store up for yourself treasure on earth. But store up treasure in heaven.' The importance that you will give in having treasure in heaven depends on how spiritual you are. If you are spiritually minded, you know that you have to get ready for the next life. And here, in this parable, we are told that when the Christians die, their works do follow them. Just like this oil. That extra oil was not for this present time. They did not need it. There was enough oil in their lamp. That extra oil was for use when they woke up at the other end, when the Lord came.

### **Living with eternity in mind**

Now you see that the message of this parable is unique. It is not just another parable about staying awake. It is not another parable that says, 'Be watchful and careful.' It is a parable that teaches us that the only ones who made it into the wedding feast were the ones who had made provision for the age to come. In other words, it is the ones who had stored up treasure in heaven. It is not enough to be a carnal Christian. You have to be a spiritual Christian to be saved.

When the foolish virgins saw that they were running out of oil, at that point, it was so far so good. Their lamp was still burning. But from that point on, it was going to go out. What a dreadful tragedy. They thought they were saved. And only at the time of the resurrection of all things, they realized that they did not have the kind of faith to get them into the kingdom of God. So near, and yet, so far.

When they woke up, they found out that they were almost out of oil. They had to look for more oil at the last minute. As they went, what happened? The bridegroom arrives. They are not there to meet him. When they came back to the banquet hall, they found that the door was closed. They started to bang on the door, saying, *Lord, Lord, open to us* (v. 11). Notice. They are still calling Him 'Lord.' A non-Christian does not call Jesus 'Lord.' Even at this desperate moment, they are still calling him 'Lord.' And notice the frightening answer. *Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.* They missed the banquet. They missed the kingdom.

You know, there was no visible difference between the ten virgins. They all had lamps and they were all called to participate in the marriage feast. The decisive moment came at the return of the master when the difference became obvious. The oil that they had, or the lack of oil showed what kind of faith they had. The ones who had extra oil showed that they lived with eternity in mind. They stored up what they will need for the age to come. Those will spend eternity with God. The ones who did not carry extra oil, who had stored up nothing because they did not live with eternity in view, will not be accepted in the banquet, in heaven. Their faith proved inadequate.

And the Lord Jesus is therefore saying to us, 'It is not only a good idea to store up treasure in heaven. It is essential to store up treasure in heaven.' Do not say to yourself that you are a Christian today, that is fine, and that is the end of the matter. Salvation cannot be separated from the way you think, the way you live, and the way you are. Whatever you may say with your mouth, your actions will show whether you live as one who has eternity in mind, as one who is spiritually wise.