

Bible Study Guide: Week of 11-2-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 25:1-13

[Jesus said to his disciples] ‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

As we begin looking at this passage, it is important to note the context. At this point in Matthew’s gospel Jesus is very near to the cross. As he winds his way through Jerusalem and toward his ultimate death and resurrection, his teaching begins to focus on the end of the age and on the second coming of the Son of Man in that last day. Here, he speaks in themes similar to those developed in Chapter 24—a sudden and unexpected arrival, a delayed arrival, the importance of watchfulness, and a distinction between those who are ready for the end of the age and those who are not.

[Jesus said to his disciples] ‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.

Throughout the gospel Jesus has been describing the kingdom of heaven. Usually early in his teaching ministry, his description was about what the kingdom would look like or how it would come during his earthly ministry. At the end of the gospel, with the shift described above toward a focus on the end times, here he is describing how the kingdom of heaven will find its fulfillment in the last day.

Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

We begin to see an allegory developing. The NRSV uses the term “bridesmaids,” though this is not a translation but an interpretive choice. The Greek term here is *Parthenos*—the root word for the building in Athens we call “The Parthenon.” It literally means virgin, maiden, or young woman. It can be used to describe a young married woman or, more often, a woman who has not had sexual relations. It is used figuratively elsewhere in the New Testament [2 Cor. 11:2 and Revelation 14:4] to refer to members of the church who are “pure” and worthy of the calling of Christ. Again, the decision to render *Parthenos* as “bridesmaids” seems to me to be making an interpretation rather than a

translation. Perhaps the translators decided that the “virgins” or “young women” are shown serving in a role of hospitality and responsibility to the bridegroom and would, therefore, be members of the wedding party, not just invited guests. Ultimately, it may not matter whether we call them “young women at the wedding” or “bridesmaids,” but it is worth noting how the translators have handled this word. The only thing that separates the bridesmaids from one another at this point is that Jesus tells us up front that only five were wise, while five were foolish. To the outside observer, all ten are doing their duty to attend the wedding and await the arrival of the bridegroom. It is only the quantity of extra oil that makes the difference here between the two groups.

⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

Had the bridegroom arrived when he was expected, the difference between the groups would never have become apparent. All likely had enough oil to last until the time when the groom was expected. But he was delayed. As the lamps burned on during their evening nap, the primary oil supply ran low for all ten. Only the five wise ones who brought extra were ready to receive the groom when he came.

Two terms here are significant. The first is “delayed.” The same term is also used in Hebrews 10:37:

³⁶You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷For, “In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.”

There, the author of Hebrews is making a similar point to the one Jesus is trying to make here. The delay of the groom in coming to the wedding is allegorical for the delay that Matthew’s community experienced when Jesus did not return as quickly as they had expected.

Likewise, the term “slept” is potentially significant on two counts. There are three Greek words for “sleep,” two of which occur in the New Testament. One is *koimao*, which is often used in the New Testament to refer not only to literal sleep, but also euphemistically to death (see Matthew 27:52, John 11:11, and 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff, for examples). That is NOT the word used here. The word used here is *katheudo*, which is most frequently used to talk about being asleep in a literal sense, but seems to be used figuratively by Jesus one time to refer to death (see Matthew 9:24). It can also have a sense of slothfulness—neglecting one’s duty by sleeping (think, for instance, of Jesus’ disciples reaction when they find him asleep in the stern of the boat while the storm is about to kill them or of Jesus’ disappointment of finding his disciples asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when they were supposed to watch and pray with him. See also 1 Thessalonians 5, where Paul urges the Thessalonians not to be asleep, but rather to be sober and watchful). This term *katheudo* may have implications for those who follow Jesus—on the one hand the parable may be indicating that some of Jesus’ followers would “fall asleep”—i.e. die—prior to his second coming. More than that, this could be a warning against complacency and a call to sober watchfulness among those who consider themselves disciples.

⁶But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” ⁹But the wise replied, “No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.”

The hour being described as “midnight” plays off of the previous parable of the thief at midnight. In that parable, the key point is to remain watchful and vigilant since the Lord’s coming will be unexpected. Here, though there is a component of watchfulness at play here, the primary point seems to be that the groom was substantially delayed (what groom, modern or ancient, shows up at midnight for his own wedding?)—delayed enough to cause an oil shortage among half of those who had nodded off to sleep.

The word for “trimmed” here is idiomatic when used with lamps. Literally, it means to adorn or prepare or put in order. So, idiomatically, to “prepare one’s lamp” is to “trim” it. The connotation here is that they wake with the shout to begin getting everything in order and adorned and prepared. Only then do the foolish ones realize their oil supply is dangerously low. The whole meaning of this parable probably boils down to (no pun intended) the meaning we ascribe to the oil.

Having oil, in rabbinical literature, can symbolically refer to following the Torah or doing good deeds. Therefore, the oil may represent deeds of love and mercy—that is, living according to the rules of the Kingdom that Jesus set out in the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, living a life of discipleship.

Rather unrealistically, the wise virgins suggest that the foolish ones go to buy more oil at midnight. I'm not sure where they would find an oil merchant open at that hour, but they leave the festivities to try to prepare at the last minute. Their task is, as we expect, futile. Rather than being present to attend to the groom and play their role in the celebration, they try to scramble to get enough oil to get through the night.

¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” ¹²But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”

The common theme from Matthew's parables of Jesus' refusal to acknowledge the unprepared or unwelcome continues here. The cry of “Lord, lord”—a common form of worship in the early church—is not enough to secure one a place in the Kingdom. It seems that words alone are not sufficient evidence of one's faith.

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

This ending, borrowed nearly verbatim from Mark 13:35, seems to work awkwardly here. Remember, keeping awake (the literal reading of this phrase) is not the issue at stake here. It is having enough oil, not keeping one's eyes open that matters. All ten virgins slept, after all. This command from Jesus to “keep awake” seems to be somewhat idiomatic here and means something closer, at least in this context, to “be responsible” or “be prepared” or “be ready.” We are urged to an alertness and a self-awareness in light of the fact that the coming of our bridegroom may be delayed a good while. Will we have enough oil (enough deeds of mercy and love) to get us through the long night ahead until he comes?

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. If the bridesmaids/virgins represent the church, how might we begin to distinguish between the wise and the foolish in our midst? Or should we even try to do so?**
- 2. Do you live with an awareness of Jesus' eventual return? Are you mindful of the fact that his return has been significantly delayed given the expectations of the early church? What do you make of this?**
- 3. If “oil” represents how we live out our faith as disciples, how are we to make sure we have enough oil? What are some ways we can replenish this supply?**