

OpenTheo

Matthew 25:1 - 25:13



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg explains the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 and its relevance to Jewish wedding customs. He points out that the wise and foolish virgins represent those who are prepared and unprepared for the arrival of the bridegroom, likened to the return of Christ. He emphasizes that being a part of the church does not guarantee readiness for His return, and that believers must faithfully follow Christ and be ready at all times. Finally, he warns against the danger of being unfaithful like the wicked servant and facing the same fate of being cut off and cast away.

Transcript

Today let's look at Matthew chapter 25, and this actually is a continuation, at least in Matthew's arrangement, of the so-called Olivet Discourse, which began in chapter 24. Many people are familiar with the Olivet Discourse as comprising the material in Matthew 24, because that material corresponds to the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 and in Luke 21 for the most part. However, in Matthew there's an entire second chapter to this discourse, and that is chapter 25.

This material in chapter 25 is not found in the other Gospels, in the other accounts of this discourse. And it may be that the other accounts simply are abbreviated, or it may be that Matthew is supplying this material from other occasions when Jesus spoke, but because of the relevance to the same subject matter, Matthew may have grouped them here in chapter 25. And what we have in this chapter is simply three parables.

There are three parables. The first of them is the parable of the ten virgins, or bridesmaids. The second is the parable of the talents, as it's usually called.

And the last of them is the parable of the sheep and the goats. And all of these have to do with the second coming of Christ and the need to be ready for it. The parable of the virgins is about ten virgins whose duty it was to wait for the coming of the bridegroom to get the bride.

And they were to meet him, because it might be in the middle of the night, they would have their lamps, which in those days were oil lamps, and they were supposed to go out

to meet him and light his way as he came to the bride's house. And these we will read about today. The second parable in this chapter, the parable of the talents, is about persons who were entrusted by their master with certain parts of his estate and given the responsibility of investing or using those assets for the profit of their master.

And then, of course, he comes and he reckons with them and rewards them according to their faithfulness. And then in the last parable of this chapter, we have the sheep and the goats, and here we have the actual judgment at the second coming of Christ, and all people are brought before him to give account of what they have done. And in that particular parable, the focus is on how one has served their brethren.

And if they have treated their brethren properly, their Christian brethren, then they have treated Christ properly, and they will be rewarded according to those factors. Now, those are the three parables that are in this chapter, and they do wind up pretty well this discourse. They are not the first parables to appear in the discourse, because at the end of chapter 24, there was a reference to a thief breaking into a house, and also a reference to a man who left his servants in charge of much of his estate and came back and found them, very much like the parable of the talents.

So there's really, at the end of this discourse in Matthew 24 and in 25, about five parables. One likens the coming of Christ to that of a thief coming. One likens the coming of Christ to the return of a master from a long trip and is judging his servants.

The three parables in Matthew 25 have to do with preparation on the part of Christ's people and being ready for him when he comes, so as to be prepared to go through that judgment without regrets. Let's look at this first parable here in Matthew 25. It's found in verses 1 through 13.

Jesus said, Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard, Behold, the bridegroom is coming, go out and meet him. Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish said to the wise, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.

But the wise answered, saying, No, lest there should not be enough for us and you, but you go rather to those who sell and buy for yourselves. 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.

Afterward the other virgins came, also saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered

and said, Assuredly I say to you, I do not know you. Watch, therefore, for you do not know either the day or the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

Now, in this parable, obviously, there is a bridegroom, and Jesus himself suggests the coming of the bridegroom represents the coming of, as he says, the Son of Man, his favorite expression for himself. So we have here a reference to the coming of the Son of Man, the coming of Christ. And he is likened to a bridegroom, and his people are likened to virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom.

Now, some awareness of Jewish wedding customs is helpful here, because there were three stages of a person's wedded life. One was the arrangement of a marriage, and the second was the betrothal period, and the third was the actual wedding. And the betrothal period was once, basically, there had been an agreement and a promise made for a young man and a young woman to marry one another.

Then there was usually about a year, or it didn't have to be a year, but generally it was, when they lived separately, but they were anticipating marriage, they were preparing for marriage. And as the end of the betrothal period drew near, the bridegroom would begin to meet with his friends, sort of like a bachelor party, and feast with them. And at a certain point, he would go, and his friends would go with him across town, or across the street, or wherever he had to go, to the bride's house to collect her for the wedding feast.

Now, the bride, knowing that this was going to be happening, would be prepared, and was expected to be prepared, around the time at the end of the betrothal, for the bridegroom to come and to take her. She had her bridesmaids, as it were, that's what the virgins here are, her fellow virgins, young ladies, young girls, who were probably her companions and her friends, who helped her to watch for the coming of the bridegroom, so that she might be ready when he comes. And these bridesmaids were to accompany the bridegroom.

Once they knew he was coming, they were to go out and meet him, and accompany him the rest of the way to the bride's house. And apparently, as the bridegroom would come with his friends down the street toward the bride's house, his friends would shout out, the bridegroom is coming. And this would alert the bridesmaids that they were to make, if it was at nighttime, which I suppose it commonly was, they were to go out with their lamps.

Remember, they didn't have streetlights in those days, or electricity. And going through the streets in the dark, so that people don't stumble over things or get lost, they needed lighting. And these virgins were to go out and light the path, so that the bridegroom and his friends could come to the bride's house.

Now, there is a temptation on the part of many teachers and readers of the Bible, to try

to make everything in this parable correspond with something else. But that is difficult to do. The greatest temptation seems to be to try to identify what the oil represents.

And since oil in Scripture very often is a symbol of the Holy Spirit himself, some have argued that oil here represents the Holy Spirit. Now, I cannot say that the oil does not necessarily, I can't say that it necessarily does not represent the Holy Spirit, but the Bible does not make any issue of that. Jesus does not say that it represents the Holy Spirit, and we cannot really be sure of that.

It seems to me that having enough oil is simply a way of saying, these women were prepared for his coming. Now, in particular, they were prepared for him to come later than they planned. They all went out with oil in their lamps.

There were ten of these bridesmaids, and five of them are said to have been foolish, and five were said to be wise. And they all had oil in their lamps because they knew that their lamps had to burn. However, five of them anticipated that the wait might be long, that he might not come within the period of time that their oil would last, and so they took extra supply of oil, and the others did not.

Now, the difference between the wise and the foolish bridesmaids in this parable then is simply that one group of them anticipated that he might not come immediately, and therefore they were ready for a longer wait than the others. Those who brought no extra oil were only prepared for him to come soon, and if he did not come soon, they would have no oil. They would be unprepared, and therefore that was why they were foolish.

They did not have any certainty as to when the bridegroom might come, and he might come very late at night after their oil had been extinguished. So, had they been wise, they would have shown some foresight, and they would have brought along a little extra oil. And that is what they did not do.

Now, I'm not going to identify the oil with any particular thing. I'm not going to say the oil represents the Holy Spirit, or give you any alternative of what oil represents here. It may represent something, but Jesus doesn't tell us what it does.

I think the lesson of the parable is what we're supposed to get rather than trying to get hung up on details. When we get too much hung up on details, we get very confused, because the relationship of Christ and the church in many ways in Scripture is compared to that of a bride and a groom. However, sometimes the Christians are likened to the bride, as when Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 2, excuse me, chapter 11, that he has betrothed the church to Christ as a chaste virgin, so that the church is like the bride, the one betrothed to Christ.

And, of course, in Revelation 19, it talks about the church as the lamb's wife. Christ is the lamb, the church is his wife. And yet, there are other places where the church is likened

to the guests at the wedding feast.

As, for example, in Matthew chapter 22, the parable of the wedding feast, Christ and God are in it as the father and son. The son is the bridegroom. But there's no reference to the bride in that particular parable, but rather to the guests.

And the guests in that parable represent the church. So, the metaphor of a marriage can change from time to time in order to emphasize a different aspect of the Christian's response and relationship to Christ. In one sense, we are like invited guests to the wedding.

In another, we're like the bride herself. As a matter of fact, in Revelation 19, we have both these metaphors mixed together because it says that the lamb's wife has made herself ready and the wedding feast has come, and it says, Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast. So, you've got the church represented as the lamb's wife and also as those invited to the wedding feast.

It's just a mixture of metaphors, as is not uncommon in Scripture. Now, in this parable, the church is, it's again a wedding metaphor, but the church is not likened to the guests of the wedding, and she's not likened to the bride of the wedding, but she's likened to the bridesmaids whose duty it is to watch for the bridegroom to come and to be ready for him when he does come. Now, this doesn't, this parable is not supposed to provide some alternative or some denial to the idea that the church is the bride.

It's just that in order to make the particular point Jesus wants to make, he wants to compare the church to these bridesmaids who have the obligation to watch for the coming of the bridegroom. Notice the bride is not in the parable at all. If she was, that might confuse things, since we are also the bride.

But this is, this parable talks only about the bridegroom and the bridesmaids, and it is in its own way telling us something more about our response and our obligation toward Christ. Now, the suggestion here is that the bridegroom may not come back as soon as the bridesmaids hope he will. Now, Jesus, of course, has been gone for 2,000 years.

We are sometimes told, wrongly, that Jesus anticipated his coming to be very soon. There are people who misunderstand what he said in Matthew 16, 28, when he said, some standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. They mistakenly think he's talking about his second coming and therefore think that he thought his second coming would be imminent.

However, Jesus did not seem to think that. You'll find that in the parables of this chapter, he talks about there being some delay, some wait. In this case, it says specifically in verse 5, but while the bridegroom was delayed, all the bridesmaids slumbered and slept.

Now, again, some people try to make an issue about the fact that they slept. Sometimes

it is said that, well, you see, the church is asleep and needs to wake up, and it's wrong for the church to fall asleep. Well, in some senses, it is wrong for the church to fall asleep, but we shouldn't make too much of this matter in the parable.

These women, you know, they got late at night. People do sleep when it gets late, and they were prepared to wake up when the bridegroom's voice was heard or the voice of his friend saying the bridegroom was coming, and they did all wake up. There's nothing here said to criticize the bridesmaids for falling asleep.

There's no negative stigma attached. As a matter of fact, the wise ones and the foolish ones both fell asleep. That is not an issue here.

What is an issue is that while they were asleep, the foolish bridesmaids did not notice that their lamps had died down and they were not prepared for an imminent coming of the bridegroom. The wise ones were free to fall asleep because even if their lamp did die down, they had some extra oil which they could use, and therefore they had the luxury of falling asleep without endangering their duty. Now, the bridegroom's coming is announced, and the bridesmaids all have an obligation to meet him, but some of them are not prepared to do so.

Some of them don't have enough oil in their lamps. They say to the others, Give us some of yours, but they can't borrow it from the others. They have to get their own.

Those who have extra oil may need it all for their own obligations, and therefore they cannot lend it. And they say, Listen, you should have gotten this when you had a chance. Go back and get some now from those who sell the oil.

Of course, in this illustration, those five who needed to go buy oil could never expect to buy it in the middle of the night. This was midnight, and the stores were not open, and therefore they were delayed a long time away, and they were simply unprepared. Now, what Jesus is saying to us here is that his coming may not be as soon as the disciples hoped, and that they should be prepared for a longer absence of Christ than they might anticipate.

Now, this means, of course, they need to keep the flame burning, as it were, in their soul. They need to keep their love for God from going cold. Jesus spoke in one place of the fact that because sin will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

And that was in Matthew 24. And if your love grows cold, then you're not prepared to meet Christ. Many people think that if you accept Christ at some point in your life, then no matter what you do after that, you're ready to meet him, and you'll go to heaven.

The Bible doesn't teach any such thing as that. It is absolutely, 100 percent absent from the pages of Scripture. Everywhere in Scripture, we are told that the believer is obligated to persevere.

The believer must continue in the faith. And there's much warning in Scripture against falling from the faith or departing from the living God or going back into the world and loving the world and its things again. In fact, right at the end of Matthew 24, there was such a warning because Jesus in Matthew 24, verses 45 through 51 said, Who is that faithful and wise servant whom his master made ruler over his household to give him food in their season? He says, Blessed is that servant whom if his master comes, he finds him so doing.

But speaking of the same servant in a different scenario, it says, But if that evil servant says in his heart, My master is delaying in his coming and begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with the drunkards, then the master of that servant will come on a day that he's not looking for him at an hour that he's not aware of and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is the same servant.

There's one servant in this picture. He is a servant and he has the option of being faithful to his commission or unfaithful. If he is faithful, he's blessed because his master will find him so doing when he comes.

But if he is a wicked servant and does the wrong thing and beats his fellow servants and so forth, then he will be treated like the hypocrites and cut in two and cast out where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is the master's servant. This is the Christian who's been given a responsibility.

He that remains faithful and does what he's to do right until the end will be blessed. The person who is unfaithful and turns from Christ and begins to get drunk and party and do all the things that unbelievers do that he had given up previously when he became a servant of Christ, but he goes back to that way, that one will be cut in two by Christ when he comes back, will be thrown where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. There is no security for the unbeliever.

And a real believer acts like a believer, you see. This person has lost his faith, and he has lost faith because he said, my master delays his coming. Now, my master delays his coming is agreeable with this parable also because it says in verse 5 of Matthew 25, but while the bridegroom was delayed.

So here we have two parables in a row, one about servants and their master, one about bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. And in both cases, the master or the bridegroom is delayed. Now, what happens because of the delay? That's what Jesus is getting at here.

His second coming was going to be delayed from the point of view of his listeners. And would they keep the faith? When the Son of Man comes, will he find the faith on the earth? He asked in a different place. And that is the question.

Now, back in the early 70s, I was part of the Jesus movement, and there was a great emphasis on the soon coming of Christ. Many thousands of people responded to altar calls and were baptized and seemed to become Christians, and many of them under the pressure of knowing or thinking that Jesus might come back at any moment, and if they were not prepared, they would go into the great tribulation or whatever they were expecting. And so many came to Christ, but many fell away.

And I believe that one of the reasons that many fell away is because the Lord delayed. He didn't come as soon as they thought. Hope deferred makes the heart sick, the scripture says, and many of them became sick of heart because Christ didn't come as soon as they had hoped.

And this caused some to fall away. They said, well, my master's delaying his coming, and they began to eat and drink with the drunkards and beat their fellow servants or just go out and be materialistic or immoral or just self-centered, narcissistic. They just, in other words, departed from Christ.

And they are like the Bridesmaids who didn't have enough oil. They weren't prepared to wait. You see, all these Bridesmaids were prepared for the Lord to come, but they weren't prepared to wait for him to come and to be still prepared at a distant point in time.

There are many people who are willing to live on the straight and narrow and follow Jesus Christ for a while if they think, you know, Jesus is coming right away. But if he delays, the genuineness of their faith and of their love for him and their perseverance is tested. And if he does not come soon, they are like these virgins who did not have enough oil.

They were not really prepared to wait that long. They were not really willing to give their whole lives to Jesus. They were hoping they might have to give a little bit and then just for fire insurance so they could go to heaven instead of going to hell when he comes.

But they weren't really prepared to give their whole lives and wait for him forever or wait for him until they died or until he came. That is the commitment that Christ calls us to. We're not here to follow Jesus for a little while hoping that he'll come during the time that we're faithful.

We're to be faithful unto death and he will give us the crown of life. That's what he told the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2.10. That's what he has to say to us as well. Jesus hasn't come as soon as some thought he would.

He might not yet come for a very long time, but he will eventually come. What is important is that we remain faithful to him until the day we die and whosoever endures to the end shall be saved. That is what this parable is about.

Some of the individual trappings of the parable are probably just stage scenery. But the message is we need to wait. We need to be prepared in case Christ waits, and that's what we're to do.