

# The Ten Virgins

The parable of the Ten Virgins also addresses the need for continual readiness as believers wait for Christ's return. The parable begins with:

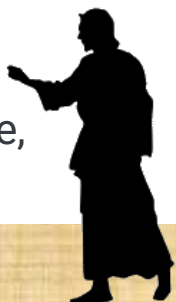
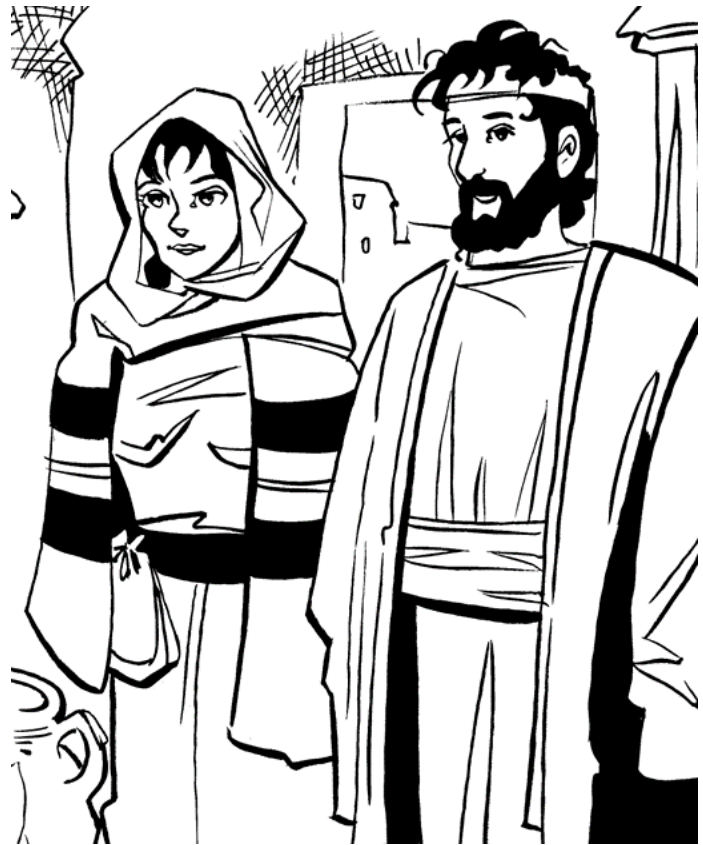
*The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. (Matthew 25:1)*

Wedding ceremonies in first-century Palestine were preceded by a betrothal. The betrothal was the first stage of marriage, and once a couple was betrothed, they were considered husband and wife. Terminating a betrothal would require the couple to go through legal divorce proceedings.

The second stage was the actual wedding ceremony, which is the setting for this parable. The ceremony generally occurred at least one year after the betrothal. Weddings took place on

Wednesdays if the bride was a virgin, and on Thursdays if she was a widow, and it seems that part of the ceremony included the groom and his friends escorting the bride and the bridal party to the home of the groom (often the home of the groom's parents), where the wedding feast—which often lasted some days—was held.

The procession of the bride to the groom's home often took place at night and included song and dancing. In Jesus' parable, ten unmarried young women were going to be part of this



procession; and because it was dark, they were going to carry torches while escorting the bride and groom.

We're now told something about the ten young women:

*Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. (Matthew 25:2-4)*



The lamps these young women carried would have been torches for outdoor use, not the oil lamps which were used indoors. These torches were a stick with bundles of cloth wrapped around the top. The cloth would be soaked in oil and then lit. These

torches would burn brightly for about fifteen minutes and then start to go out, as the oil was consumed. For this reason, those carrying such torches would take extra oil in some sort of container. Five of the girls brought extra oil with them, while the other five didn't bring any surplus. The girls who brought the oil were referred to as wise (rendered sensible or prudent in some Bible translations). Those who didn't make such preparations were referred to as foolish by Jesus. Jesus used the same wise/foolish comparison in the parable of the wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish one who built his house on the sand.

*As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. (Matthew 25:5)*

Considering that they had everything prepared for the bridegroom's arrival, and there was much they would need to do after he arrived, taking a nap while waiting was a reasonable course of action.



*At midnight there was a cry, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." (Matthew 25:6*

The word translated as midnight is not that specific; rather, it expresses that he came sometime in the middle of the night. Someone had sighted the approach of the groom's party

and called out for everyone to come outside and meet him.

*Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." (Matthew 25:7-8)*

There's no reason to think that the young women's lamps had been burning while they slept. Perhaps they had been lit earlier, but they would only have burned for about fifteen minutes before needing to be soaked in oil once again. All the women rose and prepared their lamps. The wise girls began to re-soak and light their torches. The foolish girls' lamps, however wouldn't stay lit due to a lack of oil, and were probably smoking badly since the cloth didn't have enough oil. If their torches went out then, these five young women would not be able to play their role in the torchlight parade to the groom's parents' home.

*But the wise answered, saying, "Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." (Matthew 25:9)*

The foolish girls asked the wise ones to give them some of their oil, but they refused. The unwillingness of the wise girls could seem to be



selfish, but their supply of oil was probably limited, and if they shared it, none of them would have enough oil in their lamps for the procession of the bridegroom. So to ensure there was some light for the procession, they refused to give their oil away. Rather, they suggested that those who needed oil go and purchase some.

Since it was the middle of the night, suggesting that the girls go buy oil could seem somewhat ridiculous, but it's possible that the wise girls may have been suggesting going to the shop/home of the oil seller to wake him so that he could sell them the oil; or, since there was a wedding in the village, some of the shops may have stayed open during the festivities. In any case, the foolish girls went off to try to buy the oil they should have brought with them.

*While they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he answered, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." (Matthew 25:11-12)*

These dismissive words aren't a statement that the bridegroom was not acquainted with the young women, but rather was a form of dissociation from them. His words make it painfully clear that they will not partake of the wedding festivities, that they are shut out of the celebration. The "Truly, I say to you" statement drives home the importance of the words "I do not know you." They had expected to be part of the wedding, they had a role to play, they wanted to be let in, but they were completely excluded.

The parable ends with:

*Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:13)*

The primary message that this parable conveys is the idea of Jesus' return being delayed. Believers in the early days of Christianity expected that Jesus' second coming would be soon. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus makes it clear that He didn't know the time of "that day."

*Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. (Matthew 24:36)*

He also pointed out that none of us know when that time will be.

*Know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Luke 12:39-40)*

This parable makes the point that since no one knows the time of the Lord's return, each of us must always be ready for that moment.

We don't know when the Lord will return, and we certainly don't know when our lives on this earth will end. Through this parable, Jesus expressed the need to be mindful of His return and live in a manner which reflects readiness for coming into His presence. For some believers, that will happen at His return; but for others, it will be at the time of their death. Our time to live our faith, to follow Jesus, to love others, to live honorable lives, is now. May we all live in a manner which reflects the readiness of the wise virgins, so that when we pass from this life to the next we will hear Jesus say to us, *Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:21)*