

THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH

Chapter Eleven. Matthew 25:1-13

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The Second Parable

Weddings never go out of style. They are as old fashioned as the race and as modern as today's newspaper. There is something fresh and beautiful about each one for we never seem to get over the excitement of watching two lives become one. At most weddings a lot of fuss is made over the bride and groom, but no one pays much attention to the attendants. Not so with Jesus. He chooses to use a wedding scene as a parable, to illustrate further what he means by the command, "Watch!" He doesn't even mention the bride and only incidentally the bridegroom. His attention is focused on ten young ladies who were invited to the marriage.

Do not pay any attention to the chapter division which occurs at this point in the biblical text. It is the unexpectedness of his return for the church, and of the need to keep watching for it. This is made evident by his use of "Then" to introduce the parable of the ten maidens. "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens," etc. It is at the time of his coming as a thief in the night before the Great Tribulation, when he shall appear on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. And when he finishes the story of the ten maidens the Lord adds again, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Let us now join him as he relates this story to the disciples on the Mount of Olives.

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 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. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps" (Matthew 25:1-7).

That is not the whole story but it is enough of it to serve as an introduction. The background is an eastern wedding in which the bridegroom, rather than the bride, is the center of attention. In Oriental weddings it is the bridegroom who bears all the expense of the wedding (which seems a bit fairer than our system where the poor father of the bride has to foot the bill for giving up his daughter to another man!) and thus has the prime spot. Weddings were always held at night and it was customary for the bridegroom to go to the house of the bride and take her to the wedding. As they walked through the streets they would be joined by guests at various places along the route. Our Lord's story of the ten maidens is the story of such a group, waiting for the bridegroom.

There are five movements in this story as the Lord tells it. Let us remember that it was intended for those who live in the intervening time between our Lord's first coming and his second. It will be of value to us only as we permit it to be autobiographical, if we recognize ourselves somewhere in the story. It is clearly intended to describe an element of watching that is vital and essential. If we miss the point of it we shall be unable to watch for his coming as he desires.

A Common Expectation

The first movement of the story is one of a common expectation. Here is a body of people who are waiting for someone. Life seems to be made up of a great deal of waiting. When we are little we wait to get out on our own. When we are in college we wait to get married. When we get married we wait for children, and so it goes. One of the characteristics of life which make it worth living is this note of waiting. There must be something beyond, something worth waiting for. Otherwise life can become terribly colorless and purposeless.

These maidens were waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. In terms of the Lord's ultimate message, they were waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ. These maidens represent, therefore, those who are convinced that the end of the age will come just as Jesus describes it. They are not deluded by highly colored dreams of an earthly utopia which will be brought about by man's wisdom and skill. They believe in a golden age, but they do not believe that age will ever come by the efforts of men. They are persuaded that only the return of Jesus Christ can accomplish that end, and they are hopeful that his coming will be very soon.

Surely at this point in our study of the Olivet Discourse, most of the readers of this book will represent such a group. We have been listening to the words of God's greatest Prophet. We have heard what he predicts and understood the pattern that he says will prevail as the age draws to a close. We are convinced that history will end at the feet of this One who will come flaming in glory from the heavens to astonish a deluded world. We are, therefore, sharers with these ten maidens in a common expectation of the coming of the Bridegroom.

Wise and Foolish

But the second movement of this parable is one of division, of a divided procedure:

"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."

Though this group is united in its expectation it is quite divided in the way it conducts its waiting. Five maidens have brought along extra oil, and five have not. This does not represent a division between good and bad, but, as Jesus says, between the wise and the foolish. Someone has said there are only two kinds of people in this world: the righteous and the unrighteous; but the classifying is always done by the righteous! That is all too humanly true. But here there is no moral division intended. In their expectation of the coming bridegroom they are all equally sincere and devoted. The only difference is, five of them felt it would be wise to provide some extra oil.

This proves ultimately to be the most significant part of this story. Yet, to the five foolish maidens, it represented only a trivial difference which was as nothing compared with the fact that they were unitedly waiting for the bridegroom's coming. They were all agreed on the importance of oil and were all using it for its proper purpose—the giving of light. The only slight difference was that some felt more was needed than others.

What the oil represents we shall see in a moment, but it is certainly evident that the wise and the foolish are still with us. Despite our agreement in desiring the bridegroom to come, and our conviction that history will end as Jesus describes it, nevertheless, there are doubtless some reading this who will prove in the end to be wise, and others will be revealed to be foolish, lacking the essential for waiting till the Lord returns. If this parable has any message at all for us, it is that we determine what that essential is.

Seemingly all would have gone well for the whole ten if the bridegroom had come when expected. But the third movement of the story introduces an element of delay:

"As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a

cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'"

No explanation is given for what delayed the bridegroom. This seems to be another hint from the Lord that his absence would be long extended, as has certainly proved to be the case. It was this protracted delay of the bridegroom which constituted an unexpected demand on the part of the ten maidens for more oil. At any rate, the story describes how all ten grew weary of waiting and fell fast asleep.

There are many interpreters who view this as suggesting negligence on the part of the maidens. But there is no hint of rebuke or disapproval suggested by the Lord for this sleeping. And the wise slept as well as the foolish! It was, therefore, a perfectly natural and right thing to do, under the circumstances. It was night and therefore it was impossible to do any work. It was also a festive occasion, and their only purpose for being there was to wait for the bridegroom. So when his coming was delayed they grew drowsy and it was only natural that they would drop off to sleep .

But this is highly suggestive, for it indicates the awareness of Jesus that watching does not mean unceasing, conscious anticipation of his return. We are not to be continually peering up into the heavens like an air-raid sentry on duty. Nor are we to be forever meeting and singing, "Is It The Crowning Day?" or discussing the Lord's return. Such meetings are helpful and needed, because of the human tendency to forget, but what our Lord is indicating is that watching also allows time for normal activities. Money must be earned, investments looked into, food must be cooked, babies washed, school lessons studied, weddings held and funerals attended-all the usual activities of life must go on.

While these wise and foolish maidens were sleeping, their thoughts were diverted, for the time being from the coming of the bridegroom. Thus, while we are engaged in the normal activities of life, there is no need to feel guilty because we have not been thinking of the Lord's return. There is nothing at all wrong about this, it is as it should be. We have not failed to watch because we have been busy doing natural and necessary things. These maidens were waiting for the bridegroom's coming, even while they slept. There was a sense of imminence when they went out, yet a perfectly proper activity took their attention for a time.

Here Comes the Bridegroom

But suddenly there is a cry of warning, "Behold! the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." It may well be that the ten had even posted a sentry to warn them when the bridegroom came, or it may be that the bridegroom was preceded by someone sent for that purpose. At any rate the cry is sounded and all ten of the maidens are awakened. Again it is clearly evident that the problem which would soon confront them did not arise out of the fact that they had fallen asleep. They are awake in plenty of time to meet the bridegroom.

Many times we are, like these, called back to an awareness of the Lord's imminent return by events of the day, or some realization that time is short. We are often made aware that the grind and routine of life was never intended to go on that way forever. And certainly one day the awakening will come not through events but the actual cry, it may be, of the returning Lord himself. Paul tells us that when he comes for the church it will be with a shout, and that shout may be these electrifying words, "Behold, the Bridegroom!"

Inadequate Resources

The fourth movement of the story brings a crisis. In it is revealed the wisdom of the wise and the foolishness of the foolish:

"Then all those maidens rose 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 replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.'"

To the consternation of the foolish, they find their lamps are flickering, guttering, about to go out. The long delay has used up the oil and they have no more. They make their appeal to the wise: "Give us some of your oil." The reply of the wise indicates that oil is not something that can be borrowed or loaned. Whatever it may represent, it is an individual matter. We have all felt something of this in some crisis hour when we have found our resources unequal to the demand. We see someone else who is going through the same thing, and he appears unmoved and calm, well able to take the pressure. We may long to borrow some of his strength, but it is impossible. In such an hour each has what he has and nothing more.

So it is with these five foolish maidens. Their oil is gone and to their dismay they discover their need and there is a panicky rush to get more. But our Lord moves right on into the story, and the final movement is one of denial:

"And while they went 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 maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

When the foolish finally arrived, the door was shut. Are we not surprised at that? Many will probably feel that these five were unjustly treated. Why should they not be allowed into the wedding, even if they were a few moments late? But there is no vindictiveness in this shut door. We must be careful that we do not impose our faulty judgments into this matter. What the Lord did was right, and we must be careful to look diligently for those clues that will help us learn why he takes such action as this. There is even a note of sorrow in these words, "I do not know you." Our Lord's words are a faithful, honest revelation of something that had been true all along. Weddings are no place for strangers. Only the friends of the family are permitted to come. So to these five foolish maidens the door is shut for the Lord says, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

The Meaning of Oil

With these revealing words from the Lord we can now discover what the oil signifies. Obviously, it was the lack of an adequate supply of oil which caused these foolish maidens to be met with the words, "I do not know you." They did, of course, have some oil when they began but it was not enough. Oil, in the Old Testament, is frequently used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Kings and priests were anointed with oil as a sign of their consecrated (and, supposedly, Spirit-filled) lives. Zechariah, the prophet, was shown a vision of a great golden lampstand with two olive trees standing beside it. The trees dripped oil into the bowls of the lampstand, and Zechariah was told: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). The oil symbolized the Spirit of God by which the light of testimony could be maintained in the hour of darkness.

Some ministry of the Spirit is then in view. The supreme ministry of the Spirit is to impart to men the knowledge of Jesus Christ. In John 16:13,14, Jesus said of him: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his authority, but...will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

The Spirit's task then is to take the Word of God, and through it reveal Jesus Christ. But there are levels of such revelation. There is even a Spirit-born ministry of the word to those who are not true Christians. Jesus revealed this too. "When he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8). Here is a ministry of the Holy Spirit available to anyone who will seek in the Scriptures to know the truth. But it is designed to take them deeper, into a fuller and permanent relationship that will involve the imparting of divine life.

Halfway is Not Enough

The great danger is that in exposure to the truth of Scripture, in the knowledge of its teaching, we should become satisfied with an intellectual portrait of Christ instead of a living Lord. It is possible to know much doctrine but never to know the Lord. This is the problem with the foolish maidens, who represent those who gladly take enough of the oil of the Spirit to give them immediate help in their problems, or some release from fear or guilt, but who never go on to a surrender of the will to the authority of Jesus Christ.

The foolish, then, are those who reckon no deeper than a superficial knowledge of scriptural truth. They look for moral enlightenment or for comfort in some hour of uncertainty and doubt. They read to gain reassurance when life seems to be a senseless tangle of threads without apparent purpose. They believe in the Bible but not in the Lord of the Bible. But faith must go deeper than doctrine. Orthodox knowledge is worthless unless it leads to the surrender of self. God freely lights a lamp of knowledge for all who want to know the truth of revelation, but what Jesus indicates here is that there is a deeper level of commitment to the Spirit which is essential to meet the unexpected demands life will thrust at us.

The wise have found that deeper level. They have an extra reservoir of oil which continually feeds the flame of life, never letting it falter or gutter out in darkness, undergirding them in every hour of stress, of pressure or disaster, keeping them firm and steady in the midst of the buffeting pressures of life. They have found a friend who sticks closer than a brother. They have a hidden supply of the mystic oil that lights the flame of life despite the circumstances, and the greater the pressure the brighter the light shines.

Perhaps a personal experience will illustrate this. I called on a man in the hospital once, a Christian of many years' standing. I found him unable to talk, sitting up in bed, his body wasted away to a skeleton. He was unable to move a muscle, even to lift his arms or turn his head. The best he could do in the way of talking was to utter a few guttural sounds. I asked him if he would like me to read the Scripture to him and he nodded his head. As I read, I watched his eyes. As the marvelous words from passages in Isaiah began to sink into his ears, there came a flame into his eyes, a light such as never shone on land or sea. Before we finished, I could see in that emaciated body the glory of a flame burning, unquenchable, inexhaustible, fed by the oil of the Spirit, a flame that could never be put out.

Renounce or Risk!

Perhaps you are saying, "I'll get along as long as I have my friends and my church." But what if they are taken away? What if you are shipped out to some remote post somewhere, surrounded by 20th century pagans who have committed themselves to seek nothing but the satisfaction of their immediate lusts? What will happen to you then? What if you are transferred to another city and you cannot find a church that ministers to your needs? What if you are confined to bed with a long-term illness, and you must lie there day after unyielding day with little opportunity to speak with others about the things of faith? Or, what is even more likely, what if imperceptibly, despite the eagerness you show now and the earnestness with which you read Scripture or go to church, you begin to drift and gradually are drawn back into the great cold indifference of the deluded masses?

If something like that happens it will do no good to say to another, "Give me of your oil." That cannot be done. Every impartation of the Spirit's power to an individual is marked "Nontransferable." He cannot share it with anyone else. It has been said that there are only two ways to take a thing seriously: either to renounce it or to risk everything upon it. Is this not what Jesus meant when he said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25)?

There are some who want a third choice, who are continually seeking to make a partial commitment, who try to find a compromise arrangement with God in which they may subscribe to the truth of Scripture but refuse to let it change their activities or their attitudes. That third alternative simply does not exist. That is what Jesus is saying here. That is why he says plainly to the foolish maidens, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." The end shows them for what they are. The door is shut, both to the unbeliever who never tried to get in and to the foolish person who never took God seriously.

Prayer

Lord, how many of us are burning the candle of our life on the shallow reservoir of Scriptural knowledge but have never struck deeper? How many of us, Lord, are holding you at arm's length concerning specific matters and yet priding ourselves upon our orthodoxy and our Christian faith? Save us from this folly. Bring us into that wonderful experience of finding a flame that can never be put out. In your name, Amen.

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