

Matthew 25:1 – 46

Parable 1: Matthew 25:1 – 13

¹ Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. ⁵ Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Virgins at the Wedding Feast:* The ten virgins were probably asked to lead a procession at the wedding.
- *Lamps:* The 'lamp' (lampas) is the torch (Jn.18:3; Acts 20:8; Rev.4:5; 8:10). It might also have been more like a large, flat bowl, with a rag or rope-like 'wick.' It required a lot of oil. It is not certain whether the five foolish virgins would have been able to find a place to buy oil at midnight.
- *Literary Structure:* Recall the chiasmic organization of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 23 – 25 parallels Matthew 5 – 7.
 - Jesus spoke of lighting a lamp in Mt.5:14a
 - Jesus spoke of a city on a hill in Mt.5:14b, and spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem in Mt.24
 - Jesus said at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5 – 7) that 'false prophets' who are 'inwardly ravenous wolves' (i.e. have not allowed Jesus to transform them thoroughly, from the heart level) will be turned away:

^{7:21} Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'

Parable 2: Matthew 25:14 – 30

¹⁴ For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. ¹⁶ Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. ¹⁸ But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²² Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. ²⁵ And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. ²⁷ Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. ²⁸ Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the

ten talents.’²⁹ For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.³⁰ Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Master Who Journeys and Returns*: King Herod the Great (c.72 – 4 BCE) had done this; he rebelled against his predecessor, Antigonus, journeyed from Judea to Rome to appear before the Roman Senate, obtained from them the title, “King of Judea,” and returned to execute Antigonus. Herod Archelaus, one of the sons of King Herod, had also done this. When his father died, he slaughtered 3,000 protesting Jews in the Temple, then went to Rome to confirm with Caesar that he would inherit the throne. Jesus is drawing on this history, but adds the issue of the talents.
- *Trading Profits*: Doubling the money (Mt.25:20, 22) is modest, and not that significant. If the servants had chosen to do illegal things, or oppress people, they could have gotten a lot more. The modest gain reflects something for Christians about what it means to be faithful.

Parable 3: Matthew 25:31 – 46

³¹ But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.³² All the nations will be gathered before him; and he will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;³³ and he will put the sheep on his right, and the goats on the left.³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in;³⁶ naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink?’³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe you?’³⁹ When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.’⁴¹ Then he will also say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink;⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me.’⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of you?’⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Three Parable Sequence*: Jesus tells three parables straight through. They are all about how his reign involves a period of missional work and preparation, then culmination.
 - *Ten virgins – five wise and five foolish*: On the surface, these ten women are indistinguishable. Their actions tell them apart (Mt.25:1 – 13)
 - *Three servants – two trustworthy and one lazy*: On the surface, these three servants look identical. Their actions tell them apart (Mt.25:14 – 30)
 - *Livestock – some sheep and some goats*: As newborn animals, sheep and goats look almost identical. As they grow, they look and act quite different. As a metaphor for different people, people’s actions tell them apart.
- *These Brothers of Mine*: Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus only identified *his own disciples* as ‘these brothers of mine’ [adelphois] (Mt.12:46 – 50; 23:8; 25:40; 28:10).
- *You Did It to Me*: Jesus continues the pattern of God identifying with His people (Gen.12:1 – 3; Zech.2:8; Acts 9:3; 1 Cor.3:16 – 17), such that what people do Jesus’ disciples, they do to Jesus himself.

Questions

1. Let's look at the first parable, the parable of the ten virgins.
 - a. What questions do you have? Possible questions that come up
 - i. Why couldn't the five wise virgins share their oil?
 - ii. Was it wrong for the women to sleep?
 - iii. Is this about timing (it'll happen soon) or preparation (it'll happen eventually, but be ready)?
 - iv. What about the parallels to earlier parts of Matthew? They say, 'Lord, Lord,' just like the false prophets who are inwardly ravenous wolves. Are they the same?
 - b. Let's carefully consider what's going on here, using the background notes. Could the five virgins share their oil?
 - i. If the ten virgins were asked to lead a procession at a wedding, there needs to be ample light for the whole time. It would be awful for the oil to run out. That explains why the five virgins didn't share their oil. They couldn't without risking the whole role they were playing.
 - ii. Also, the five wise virgins took oil in flasks with their lamps (v.4). The foolish ones took 'no oil with them' (v.3). Literally.
 - iii. So when the foolish virgins say, 'Our lamps are going out,' they are lying. Their lamps aren't even lit to begin with.
 - iv. Notice that the lamps are not modern day camping lanterns. They were either big torches, or open bowls.
 - c. Why would the foolish virgins *not* have taken oil with them? They would have had to carry them in flasks. It was bulky, and maybe unwieldy. Without flasks, they were more 'free.'
 - i. Application: Without Jesus, you feel more 'free' but you are really damaging yourself and the role God calls you to play in His great celebration.
 - d. What's going on with their lying in v.8?
 - i. They pretend they once had oil. But they never did.
 - ii. Notice this is just like the false prophets of Mt.7. They pretend they know Jesus. They pretend they took his heart-transforming word into themselves. But they never did.
 - iii. That means that they are not even repentant. They try to lie to cover up their own failure.
 - iv. So they go try to find some oil to buy ... at midnight?!? Not likely.
 - v. Then they show up for the wedding and want to be in the processional ... likely without their lamps lit.
 - e. The main issue is not timing, but preparedness.
 - i. The wise virgins were prepared. They bought oil and lugged their flasks around, even though it was inconvenient and they didn't know when the bridegroom was coming. Sleeping was okay. In fact, an interpreter named Karl Paul Donfried suggests that 'sleep' is death, and 'rose' is resurrection.¹
 1. A lot of people assume that Jesus and his disciples thought that Jesus' second coming would be right away. This parable shows that they did not necessarily think that. A lot of time could pass.
 - ii. The foolish virgins were not prepared. They thought they had lots of time, and didn't want to be prepared during that time.
 - iii. And because of the parallel with the false prophets of Mt.7:21 – 23, I would venture to say that they did not receive the Spirit of Jesus, the life of Jesus, and the word of Jesus into themselves. That is what the oil represents. They needed to allow themselves to be changed by Jesus from within. That's hard work to carry that around. *It is hard, spiritual work to be prepared.*
 - iv. Application: That is why I call non-Christians into high-bar conversion invitations. It makes me much more confident about their decisions. For example, in January 2013, I taught on dating, sex, love and marriage from the Song of Songs to Boston College's Asian Christian Fellowship. About 10 of the 100 students who came were non-Christians. Although I was funny and personal and vulnerable, I said the most

¹ Karl Paul Donfried, 'The Allegory of the Ten Virgins [Matt 25:1 – 13] as a Summary of Matthean Theology,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 [1974], 415 – 28.

challenging things about dating that any Christian teacher could: dating is for discernment for marriage; practice affection, but the line stops at arousal; you don't need to close your door when you're with the person you're dating; dating someone you know you can't marry is always unloving or hedonistic; a Christian dating a non-Christian falls into that category of dating someone you know you can't marry, therefore it is always wrong; dating is a context where we have to struggle against our own selfishness and yield to the Lord who defines what marriage is, and therefore what true love is. Even though I said all that, the non-Christians really appreciated it; one even became a Christian; and another went back and told his non-Christian friends that he was really close to becoming a Christian. That's what I mean by a high-bar conversion invitation. I do not like shallow presentations of Jesus that make him out to be afterlife insurance. How is that really addressing their sinfulness? Jesus came to save us from the *source* of our sins, our *sinfulness* (Mt. 1:21, 'he will save his people from their sins'), not just the *consequences* of our sins. But we have to agree with Jesus and allow him to do that work in us.

- v. Application: A lot of the time, when people say that they will accept Jesus later, like when they're about to die, they underestimate the strength of their own resistance to Jesus, and how that will probably grow over time. The question is not whether they will have the chance to accept Jesus later – they will. The question is whether they will want to accept Jesus later – they might not. They'll probably say to Jesus, 'Look, why are you still in such a rush? Can't I have more time. You want all eternity with me. Can't we divide up the time...? C'mon...'
2. What about the parable of the three servants and the talents?
- a. What questions do you have about this parable? (Likely ones...)
 - i. What abilities do each servant have? How important is that to the parable? Is it something we should look for in ourselves? Or is it just a device that moves the story along?
 - ii. How long was this journey that the master was taking? What did the servants know?
 - iii. Was there some indirect communication going on? How did the first two servants know that
 - iv. What's wrong with what the third servant did?
 - b. The first and second servants
 - i. The first and second servants reinvest their master's wealth. They do something with it to advance his kingdom and his interests. They like the partnership and being entrusted.
 - ii. What is Jesus referring to? Advancing his kingdom! Taking what is invested in you and investing them into others!
 - 1. Notice that this is not a mandate to just 'study hard and do well in school.' The context is all about what Jesus uniquely leaves his disciples.
 - 2. Notice that when Matthew organizes his Gospel in a chiasmic form, this helps us stabilize interpretation. <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-chiasm.pdf>. This fifth discourse parallels the first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. Both are about taking the word (teaching) of Jesus and passing it on.
 - 3. In Luke 19:11 – 17, where Jesus tells a variant of this parable right after dining with Zaccheus and before entering Jerusalem, the meaning is the same. Zaccheus is like the first or second servant who has internalized Jesus' word. In this case, Zaccheus has taken into himself Jesus' teaching against greed and for reconciliation (for example in Luke 6:12 – 49; 12:13 – 34; 14:12 – 35; 16:1 – 13) as shown by his radical gesture of giving away half his possessions to the poor and promising to restore 4 times what he has defrauded others (Ex.22:1 – 16 requires thieves to return 2 to 5 times what they have stolen). He can now pass Jesus' word on to others.
 - iii. Illus: one of the students I've worked with at Boston College, and the pattern of discipleship I've seen unfold there
 - c. Why the third servant resists
 - i. How does he see his master? As a hard man, reaping where he does not sow and gathering where he scattered no seed.

- ii. Notice that his master does not deny this. He is ‘a hard man’ after all. The parable operates with a ‘how much more’ logic. If the servants were willing to serve a hard master, how much more are servants of God willing to serve a generous and loving God?
 - iii. Illus: The Jewish historian Josephus could qualify as a third servant. He knew the Scriptures but basically denied the prophecies. He took the side of the Romans against the Jews during the First Jewish-Roman War of 66 – 70 AD. And most significantly, of course he denied Jesus.
 - iv. Application: Someone who grows up with much knowledge of the Word of God but scorns it by not investing it into others – this person shows that he or she has not actually yielded to the Word of God at all.
 - d. The difference between the servants
 - i. For the first and second servants, it’s a privilege to be entrusted. It’s partnership. For the third servant, it’s not. He feels used.
 - ii. Illus: Gandalf encouraging the members of the Fellowship of the Ring and King Theoden. But Saruman said, ‘Gandalf only uses those whom he purports to love.’ But for Gandalf, it is love and courage, truly, that he offers. But to receive it as love, and not as being used, it means also resisting the evil.
 - iii. Illus: Dumbledore preparing Harry Potter to die. Snape said, ‘Have you fattened him up for the slaughter, then?’ But for Dumbledore, it is partnership. And perhaps that is why Dumbledore wanted to die first. To show Harry that one need not fear death. And he knew that for Harry, because of his love, it was not a matter of being used, but a matter of partnership.
 - iv. Actually, there is something within the third servant that resists the master. That’s the problem being highlighted here.
- 3. How about the third parable? Please notice the background notes. You can see where I’m going with this.
 - a. Most people interpret this parable as Jesus teaching on the importance of doing social justice. Just identify poor people, and then say that Jesus is with them. But that’s not what I think is going on.
 - b. I think that Jesus is saying his disciples will be poor, imprisoned, etc. All the Gentile peoples around will have their eternal destiny altered by how they respond to the disciples’ word.
 - c. Why do I take this interpretation?
 - i. Jesus calls his disciples ‘my brethren.’ He does not call all poor people around the world, in all times and places, ‘my brethren.’
 - ii. Because of the larger theme of God identifying Himself with His people.
 - 1. When God speaks to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 – 3, He says that He will bless those who bless Abraham, and curse those who curse Abraham. So He identifies Himself with Abraham in a particular way which would unfold later.
 - 2. God links Himself with Israel, saying, “He who touches you, touches the apple of [My] eye” (Zech.2:8)
 - 3. Jesus links himself with his disciples when Saul of Tarsus was persecuting them. So Jesus appeared to Saul in a vision and said, “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:3)
 - 4. Paul says that because God’s Spirit dwells in us, God identifies Himself with us: “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.” (1 Cor.3:16 – 17)
 - iii. Logically, it makes more sense. Jesus is about to die and rise again and then send his disciples out on the mission to the world. So it makes more sense to talk to the disciples about the importance of their going out and how their lives will give peoples the chance to accept or reject Jesus himself. That makes a lot more sense than saying that the last thing Jesus mentioned was the importance of social justice, and that he will be in the poor and imprisoned.
 - iv. Because Matthew has arranged his Gospel in a chiasm. Notice what is opposite this section: Jesus talks about building a house on the rock, meaning his word, not on sand (Mt.7:24 – 29). This is parallel to the Gentile peoples building their lives on the disciples’ word. Even though the disciples are poor, outcast, and imprisoned for their faith!

- d. If this is the case, then Jesus would be assuming that his disciples *would become* hungry, thirsty, poor, and imprisoned, not just serve those groups. If that's the correct interpretation, that's EVEN MORE RADICAL. What are we supposed to learn and do? Preach no matter how bad people react!
 - i. Illus: There was a great quote said by Sir Thomas More while he was imprisoned by King Henry VIII. King Henry wanted to divorce his wife and remarry because his wife was not bearing him sons. The king defied the Law of Moses and the will of God in this matter. He sought More's blessing because More was so respected. When More did not grant his approval to the marriage, the King had him imprisoned. Here was a man of high position who could have easily capitulated to get himself out of prison. But he held steadfast to what he believed was true because of his devotion to God. His own daughter Margaret was sent to him while he was in prison to try to dissuade him from his position. She said that he stop trying to be so heroic in this world. He responded, 'If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good and greed would make us saintly. We'd all live like animals, or angels, in a happy land that needs no heroes. But since in fact we find that we have to choose to be human at all, then perhaps we have to stand fast a little, even at the risk of being heroes.' When Margaret argued that it is more reasonable to agree with the king, More responded, 'Finally, it's not a question of reason. Finally, it's a question of love.' There was a great man of integrity. More was beheaded on charges of high treason. What do our lives matter for? Would we say that it is a question of our love for God?
 - ii. Illus: We only have 'First World Problems.' In some cases, people get killed for their faith in Jesus.
 - iii. What happens to those who afflict God's people? They afflict Jesus himself.
 - iv. What is the importance of the disciples and their mission, then? It's super important! We cannot separate the proclamation from the church. The church as a community, and we as messengers, play a vital role.
4. How are these three parables tied together?
 - a. We are to have oil (probably Jesus' life and Jesus' word in us). Taking in Jesus to ourselves changes us. It means that we are prepared to celebrate with him.
 - b. We are to use what was invested in us to invest in others and advance the kingdom and goals of our master, Jesus.
 - c. We are to know the significance of our mission in the world. People will be judged based on how they judge the word we speak and the message we embody.
5. What is Jesus' final judgment going to be like?
 - a. Jesus will judge who we have become, and what we have done. Those two things are related, because we are human beings and human becomings.
 - i. The five wise virgins made sure to get oil, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit and the internal transformation Jesus' Spirit brings into us. The five foolish virgins did not, and then lied about it.
 - ii. The two faithful servants looked to advance the master's interests. The lazy servant didn't.
 - iii. The goats didn't respond to Jesus' presence in the most vulnerable of his disciples.
 - b. What we do affects who we become.
 - i. We can become goats, rather than sheep. The point is not that we are born one or the other. The point is that we have a choice. The sheep and the goats are metaphorical reference points.
 - c. What we do will affect our understanding of Jesus' himself, and his character, and his love
 - i. The lazy servant thought the master was "a hard man" (Mt.25:24), even though the master was not "a hard man"!
 - d. When Jesus judges, he sends people away from himself. He sends away the foolish virgins, the lazy servant, the goats. Why does he do this?
 - i. This is almost certainly meant to inform moments when church leaders need to send people away from the church for not being true followers of Jesus, even though they have claimed to be. That is discussed in Mt.18:15 – 20, for instance.

- ii. What will it feel like? The second parable here describes “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt.25:30) as the emotion of regret and frustration.
- iii. Why “outer darkness”? What is that? In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus describes the effect of his judgment in terms of both fire and darkness.
 - 1. We cannot separate the two, because he intends for us to take them together.
 - 2. “Fire and darkness” together is the experience of Israel rejecting God at Mount Sinai, when God drew near to them and called out to them.
 - 3. Notice that Moses went up to God’s presence on the mountain, through and in the fire. And then, Moses emerged with his face shining (Ex.34), like Jesus in his transfiguration (Mt.17:1 – 3).
 - 4. This is how Moses describes why Israel experienced God as fire and darkness:

4:11 You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain *burned with fire* to the very heart of the heavens: *darkness*, cloud and thick gloom... 24 For the LORD your God is a consuming *fire*, a jealous God... 5:4 The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, 5 while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the *fire* and did not go up the mountain... 24 You said... 27 Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it.’ (Dt.4:11 – 5:27)

Jesus keeps people in his presence, which is why they experience fire and darkness. They have become people who receive God and experience God as only “fire and darkness” because despite God being right there, they are trying to stay away.

- e. For more on this, see the following resources:
 - i. *Matthew’s Theme of Fire and Darkness* found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-matthew.
 - ii. *Hell as the Love of God* found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire.