

Matthew 25:1-13

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-25/matthew-251-13/>

Jesus tells an extended parable about the kingdom of heaven and His return, likening them to a bridegroom coming for His bride late at night. As ten bridesmaids wait for his coming they fall asleep. Five of them were wise and brought extra oil for their lamps. Five were foolish and did not. When the bridesmaids wake up, the wise ones were able to participate in the procession and wedding feast, while the foolish ones missed this opportunity. The bridegroom did not approve of them when they returned. Jesus warns the disciples to be alert for His return.

This parable is unparalleled in the gospel accounts. But its teachings compare with what Jesus taught in Luke 12:35—36.

The disciples had asked Jesus three questions as they left the Temple in Jerusalem, after Jesus predicted it would be torn down completely. Their questions were: “When will these things be?”; “What is the sign of Your coming?”; and “What is the sign of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). Jesus answered their questions in reverse order before exhorting them to *be alert* and ready for His return (Matthew 24:42).

Following this admonition, Matthew recorded a trio of parables that Jesus told His disciples in order to help them remember and apply the things He’d just taught them.

The first parable was “The Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants” (Matthew 24:45—51).

The second parable was “The Parable of the Bridesmaids” (Matthew 25:1—13).

The third parable was “The Parable of the Talents” (Matthew 25:14—30).

In this section of commentary, we will look at the second parable of this trio.

Jesus identified the main point of “The Parable of the Bridesmaids” at the end. His main application was: *Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.*

The parable’s takeaway is nearly identical to the admonition Jesus issued His disciples after He finished answering their questions about the end of the age.

“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”
(Matthew 24:42)

Jesus had explained to His disciples the signs signifying when His return was imminent (Matthew 24:15; 24:21; 24:29), but He made clear that no one but the Father knew *the day* or *hour* of His coming (Matthew 24:36). Because the disciples could *not know* exactly when He would return to inaugurate His *kingdom*, they would have to remain *alert*.

Jesus said, *the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins (bridesmaids), who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.* The expression *will be comparable* does not mean *the kingdom* and these *ten virgins will be* alike in every respect, but in some respects or in a general sense.

This was His second explicit reference to *the kingdom* in the Olivet Discourse. The first mentioning of *the kingdom* was in Jesus's answer to the disciples' third question: "What is the sign of the end of the age?" Jesus said the sign that the end of the age has come is "This gospel of *the kingdom* shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations" (Matthew 24:14). These two *kingdom* references affirm what the disciples naturally assumed: that the end of the age would be coupled with the King's (Messiah's) return, and ascension to the throne of Israel.

This link along with Jesus's admonition at the parable's conclusion to *be alert* demonstrate that the main aspect that *the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to the ten virgins* is in how it arrives.

The kingdom of heaven's coming, will be like ten virgins or bridesmaids, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

The setting for this parable is the eve of a Jewish *wedding feast*.

The commentary for this parable will explain:

- The Marriage Process in Ancient Judea
- The Story of the Parable
- The Parable's Symbols
- The Meaning of the Parable
- Parallels between Jewish Marriage Customs and Jesus as the Bridegroom

The Marriage Process in Ancient Judea

In ancient Jewish culture, *the wedding* of bride and *bridegroom* was a multiple stage process.

First there was an Engagement.

This was an agreement to marry between the families and was typically done through a formal arrangement between the fathers of the bride and *bridegroom*. This arrangement signaled an intent to marry.

Second there was the Betrothal.

This was a legally binding covenant that declared the bride and *bridegroom* to be officially married. Each party was legally responsible to fulfill the agreed—upon terms for the marriage: the purchase price and so forth. The Betrothal Ceremony was usually held in the home of the bride's parents. But even though the bride and *bridegroom* were considered to be married, they

lived apart for a period of time—typically a year. Mary, through the Holy Spirit, miraculously conceived Jesus while she was betrothed to Joseph (Matthew 1:18). During the Betrothal phase, if *the bridegroom* died, the woman was considered a widow; unfaithfulness was considered adultery; and calling off the wedding required a certificate of divorce (Matthew 1:19).

Third there was a *Wedding Procession*.

At the end of the Betrothal, *the bridegroom* would march with his friends to retrieve his bride and bring her back to his house for *the wedding feast* and ceremony. This procession took place at night, which was why *lamps* were necessary. *The precise day and hour of the wedding feast* was not known far in advance. But it was not terribly difficult to tell when *the wedding* was approaching because of the vast preparations that had to be finalized shortly before *the wedding feast* could begin. The bride and her bridesmaids likely learned that it was the beginning of her *wedding* week sometime before nightfall on the evening her *wedding* would begin. Recall how in Jesus's Parable of *the Wedding Feast* (Matthew 22:2—14) a general invitation was sent out so that the father of the groom could determine how much food was needed, and then sent out a second invitation to call his guests on the day of *the wedding* to inform them that the *wedding feast* was to happen tonight (Matthew 22:3—4).

As the bridegroom made his final preparations, the bride and her bridesmaids (*the ten virgins*), made themselves ready and waited for *the bridegroom* to arrive. When he came, they would join him in the happy procession back to *the bridegroom's* house where *the wedding feast* and ceremony would take place. This procession was a joyful parade of close friends of the bride and *bridegroom*. *The wedding party's* dancing and laughter filled the streets, and their torches and *lamps* brightened the night.

Fourth there was a *Wedding Feast*.

The wedding feast can refer to one of two things.

Wedding feast can be used as a general term to describe the weeklong gathering commemorating and rejoicing over the new marriage. This includes several days of *wedding* celebrations, the *wedding* ceremony; a *wedding* supper; and finally, the sexual union of the bride and groom in *the wedding* chamber. Jewish weddings were the rehearsal dinner, the ceremony, the reception, and the honeymoon all in one.

Wedding feast can also be used as a specific term for the *wedding* supper, which usually occurred at the end of the celebrations and before the consummation.

Jesus appears to be using *wedding feast* in the first (and general) sense of this term in this parable, to refer to the weeklong celebration. (He seems to use the term both ways in the Parable of *the Wedding Feast* (Matthew 22:2—14)). A *wedding feast* was essentially a week—long party (Judges 14:12). It entailed several days of celebrations with drinking wine, dancing, and eating delicacies. The celebrants included the bride and bridegroom and their close friends and family. Jesus's first public miracle in Cana took place on the third day of a *wedding feast* after the wine had run out (John 2:1).

The Story of the Parable

The parable begins at the end of the betrothal period, just before *the wedding* procession. The bride and her *ten* bridesmaids (ten virgins) have recently received word that *the bridegroom* will come to receive his bride tonight. But whether by custom and/or circumstance, *they don't know* the precise *hour* he will arrive. *They* get ready for his coming, likely by putting on their *wedding* clothes (Matthew 22:11). And per tradition *they took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom*.

Jesus said that *five* of these bridesmaids *were foolish, and five were prudent*.

Jesus explained how *five of the virgins were foolish*. *They were foolish* because *when they took their lamps, they took no oil with them*. The kind of *lamps* they likely used were small clay *lamps* with a handle on one end and a small spout on the other where a wick was placed to be lit. The *oil* they used was likely olive *oil*, and it was what kept *the lamps* burning bright. ([See Image.](#))

The foolish virgins neglected to ensure that *they* had enough *oil* for *their lamps*. *Their* folly could have been through forgetfulness, neglect, or poor calculation. But whatever *their* thinking, *they* foolishly assumed that whatever *oil* was already in *their lamps* would be enough for *them* to light their *lamps* during *the wedding* procession.

But the prudent bridesmaids planned ahead. *They took oil in flasks along with their lamps when they went out to wait for the bridegroom*. *They* made sure that *they* had enough *oil* to light *their lamps* and would be ready whenever *the bridegroom* came.

Jesus continued, *now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep*. There is not much to squeeze from these details besides the bare facts.

- *The bridegroom* was later than expected.
- And while *the ten virgins* stayed up waiting for him to arrive they all (both *the foolish* and *the prudent*) fell asleep together.

Perhaps because *they* fell asleep, *the foolish* bridesmaids were unable to recognize that *they* were running out of *oil* for *their lamps*.

But at midnight there was a shout. *Midnight* was a late *hour* to begin a party, but nevertheless, that was when *the bridegroom* came. The *shout* likely came from the friend of *the bridegroom*. It startled the *ten* bridesmaids awake. The *shout* announced, “*Behold, the bridegroom* is coming soon! *Come out to meet him*.” In just a moment *the wedding* procession would begin. And *they* would dance and light the way for *the wedding* couple from the bride’s home to the home of *the bridegroom* where *the wedding feast* would commence.

Then all those virgins awoke and *rose* with excitement. He was coming! The wedding was about to begin! *They trimmed their lamps* for the procession.

The five foolish bridesmaids then realized that they were out of oil and their lamps would not light. They would not be able to participate in the wedding procession without more oil.

They then asked the prudent bridesmaids, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” But the prudent answered, “No, there will not be enough for us and you too.” The bridesmaids who were prudent only had enough oil for their lamps and had none left over to give.

Instead of taking their oil, the prepared bridesmaids remarked to the unprepared bridesmaids “Go to the dealers and buy some oil for yourselves.” Doing this would take precious time. The foolish virgins would have to go to a dealer, and likely wake him up, and convince him to sell them some oil, buy some, and return before the bridegroom came. As unhelpful of an aspect as this was, the foolish bridesmaids had no choice.

And while the foolish bridesmaids were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came. Those who were ready [the prudent bridesmaids] went in with him on the wedding procession to the wedding feast.

Once they were inside the courtyard or house of the bridegroom where the feast was happening, the door was shut.

Sometime later, the other virgins also came to the bridegroom’s house. Jesus did not say whether or not they ever found any oil, but with the wedding procession over, it was no longer needed. When they found the door shut, they called out saying, “Lord, lord, open up for us.” The expression, Lord, lord, is best understood in this context as “Sir, sir.”

But, when the bridegroom answered them, he said, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.”

“I assure you that I do not know you.” Wow! This sounds like an unusual and cold thing to say to someone who is among your bride’s best friends. And it is an even stranger thing to say to her friends on your wedding night, after you have likely invited them to come and have prepared for their inclusion at your wedding feast.

The Greek word translated as know in this rebuke is the term “oida.” It usually means to know something based off reflection or information, i.e. to “know of” or “know about.” But “oida” can also mean “respect,” “appreciate,” or “approve.” 1 Thessalonians 5:17 is a clear instance of this usage: “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate (‘oida’) those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord.”

And given the context, this second meaning of “oida” makes a great deal more sense for the bridegroom to say to the unprepared, late—arriving bridesmaids.

Truly I say to you, I do not appreciate your foolishness or approve of you to join us in our wedding feast. I am insulted by your negligence. You may not come in.

Jesus then told the point of the parable to His disciples. *Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour of the Son of Man's return.*

The Parable's Symbols

There are fourteen major symbols in the Parable of the Bridesmaids.

1. ***The bridegroom*** represents Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 9:15; John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2).
2. ***The ten virgins*** together represent believers in Jesus who are awaiting His return.
3. ***The five foolish virgins*** represent *foolish* believers who neglect to ready themselves for His return.
4. ***The five prudent virgins*** represent *prudent* believers who are vigilant to be ready for His return.
5. ***The bridegroom's delay***, represents the meantime we as believers have in this life before Christ's return.

“For the vision is yet for the appointed time;
It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail.
Though it tarries, wait for it;
For it will certainly come, it will not delay.”
(Habakkuk 2:3)

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”
(2 Peter 3:9)

6. ***The virgins' drowsiness and sleep*** may possibly represent their death (John 11:11,13, 1 Thessalonians 5:14—15).
7. ***The shout*** represents the “great trumpet” that gathers God's chosen (Matthew 24:31).

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:16)

This is the return of Jesus to meet His people in the air, and likely precedes His return to earth after the great tribulation.

8. ***The virgins' rising*** may be *their* resurrection in the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 5:14—15). If this is the case, the time to be prudent and prepare for His coming is while it is still day—i.e. before we die or are caught up to meet the Lord in the air. After we rise there will be

no *oil* for us to *buy*. Buying oil here represents our preparation on earth for the next life. When we wake, we will either have *oil* for our *lamps* or we will not. (Compare the judgment at 1 Corinthians 3:11—15).

9. **The oil** represents fruits of faithfulness and love that serves others and pleases God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

10. **The lamps** represent our hearts, minds, and souls (“*psuche*”).

Are our *lamps* full of the righteousness of God’s Spirit or are they full of the rottenness of our sinful flesh?

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow wear.”
(Galatians 6:7—9)

11. **The wedding procession** represents Christ’s approval of our faithful lives at the judgment and the sharing of His joy over you (Matthew 10:32; 25:21; 25:23; 1 Corinthians 3:14).

12. **The wedding feast** represents the “marriage supper of the lamb” (Matthew 22:2; Revelation 19:7—9).

13. **The door being shut** represents the closing of our opportunity to enter *the kingdom* by faith (Matthew 6:33; 7:12—14).

“Even though now for a little while... you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”
(1 Peter 1:6—7)

14. **The Bridegroom’s rebuke, “I do not know—approve of—you”** represents God’s disapproval of a believer’s unfaithfulness at the judgment and the bitter disappointment that he has missed His *kingdom* (Matthew 22:11—13; 1 Corinthians 3:15)

Also consider what Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount:

“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. 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?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew (‘Ginsosko’ i.e. was close friends with) you.’”
(Matthew 7:21—23)

In each of these instances *enter the kingdom* refers to enjoying the full benefits of *the kingdom*, its full rewards ([See commentary on Matthew 19:16—22](#) for a fuller explanation of entering *the kingdom* referring to rewards).

The Parable's Meaning

Once again, the main point of Jesus's parable is to *be alert* and remain faithful until the Messiah's return so that you will receive His approval and get to participate in the joyful celebration of His triumph, rather than gaining His disapproval and forfeiting your place in the celebration. As the Apostle John told his followers, we do not want a partial reward, but rather we desire to have a full reward (2 John 1:8).

In Luke's narrative of the Olivet Discourse, He recorded Jesus as teaching:

“Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

(Luke 21:34—36)

This parable is a story about that very teaching. The words Luke recorded Jesus as saying here on the Mount of Olives was also similar to what Jesus taught His disciples in His Sermon on the Mount when He said not to worry about the things of this life, as to what we will eat or drink (Matthew 6:25—31), but to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (harmony with the King) (Matthew 6:33).

Living a life that pleases the *Lord* is how we have *oil* in our *lamps* when *the Bridegroom* comes. Pleasing the *Lord* means loving Him and obeying His commands (John 14:23—24.) And this takes faith (Galatians 5:6; Romans 14:23; Hebrew 11:6).

One of the keys to remaining faithful in a world full of temptations is to *be alert*. This means remembering why we choose to live as God has called us to live. This means keeping our eyes on the prize so that we do not become disqualified for the wedding (1 Corinthians 9:24—27; Philippians 3:14; Colossians 3:2). Long term Christian faithfulness does not happen on autopilot. It requires deliberate and continual focus,

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

(Hebrews 2:1—3)

Another important principle we can take from this parable is the importance of pacing ourselves, and finishing strong. We don't want to burn out. Neither do we want to relax and say “I paid my dues, now it's time to relax.” Our time on earth is brief. Our opportunity to know and be known

by faith occurs only in this one, brief lifetime. So, it is important to take full advantage of the opportunity. It will not come again.

Parallels between Jewish Marriage Customs and Jesus as the Bridegroom

It is interesting to consider the many parallels between the Jewish Marriage Customs of Ancient Judea and Jesus as *the Bridegroom* and the Church, His Bride (Ephesians 5:31—32).

(The following parallels have been expanded and adapted from Jody Dillow's chart in *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of Servant Kings*, 805—806).

1a. The marriage covenant was arranged in advance by the Father of the Bride and *Bridegroom*.

1b. Jesus's Father and (father) Abraham made a covenant whereby His descendants would be blessed. Jesus's Bride, the Church, are the spiritual descendants of (father) Abraham (Genesis 17:1—16; Romans 4:16—17; Galatians 3:8—9).

2a. The Jewish *bridegroom* departed the house of his father and traveled to the home of his future bride to betroth himself to her and establish a marriage covenant.

2b. Jesus departed His Father's house and traveled to earth, the home of His bride, and betrothed Himself to the Church by the New Covenant (John 3:13; Ephesians 4:10; Philippians 2:5—7).

3a. The Jewish *bridegroom* gave a betrothal gift to His bride.

3.b The Holy Spirit is given as a betrothal pledge of Jesus's promise (Ephesians 1:13—14).

4a. The Jewish *bridegroom* paid a price of purchase to obtain his *bride* (Genesis 24:53; Genesis 29:20; 34:12; Exodus 22:16—17).

4b. Jesus paid a price of purchase to obtain His bride, the Church (1 Corinthians 6:19—20).

5a. Betrothed Jewish Brides were sanctified and set apart exclusively for her *bridegroom* (Matthew 1:18—20).

5b. The Church is sanctified and set apart exclusively for Jesus (Ephesians 5:25—27; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11; Hebrews 10:10; 13:12).

6a. Following the betrothal ceremony, the Jewish *Bridegroom* left his bride's home and returned to their father's house.

6b. Jesus left earth, the home of His bride, when He ascended to His Father (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9—11; Ephesians 4:10; Hebrews 1:3; 1 Peter 3:22).

7a. The Jewish *bridegroom* was separated from his bride for a season after he left her home.

7b. Jesus has been separated from the Church on earth for 2,000 years. This is the “delay of the Bridegroom” (Matthew 25:5).

8a. The Jewish *bridegroom* prepared a home in his father’s house for his bride.

8b. Jesus is preparing a dwelling place in His Father’s home for the church (John 14:2).

9a. The Jewish *bridegroom* came to take his bride to live with him after a period of separation (Song of Solomon 2:8—13).

9b. Jesus will come to fetch His bride to live with Him at the end of a period of separation (Matthew 25:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; John 14:3).

10a. When the Jewish *bridegroom* came to fetch his bride to live with him in his father’s house, he came with a procession of friends.

10b. When Jesus returns to fetch His bride, He will be accompanied by an angelic escort (1 Thessalonians 4:16—17) and *a wedding* procession (Matthew 25:1—7).

11a. The Jewish bride did *not know* the time when *the bridegroom* would *come* for her.

11b. The Church does *not know the day or the hour* when Jesus will return to fetch her (Matthew 24:42; 25:13).

12a. The Jewish *bridegroom*’s arrival was heralded by *a shout*.

12b. When Christ returns to fetch His bride there will be *a shout* (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Matthew 25:6).

13a. The Jewish bride returned with *the bridegroom* to the groom’s father’s house. (This is *the wedding* procession described in this parable.)

13b. When Jesus comes for His church, He will take her to His Father’s house (John 14:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

14a. Only invited guests and family and friends could attend *the wedding* feast.

14b. While all are invited to *the wedding* feast, only believers in Jesus who have lived a life pleasing to God (i.e. clothed in *wedding* garments/have *oil* of faithfulness) are allowed to participate in it (Matthew 22:11, 14; 25:10; Revelation 19:7—9).

For more details about an ancient Jewish *wedding feast*, please see [TheBibleSays’ commentary](#) on Matthew 22:1—14 which discusses the Parable of *the Wedding Feast*.

Biblical Text

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.