

Session Ten: The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins in the Gospel of Matthew

Prayer

Introduction to the final video sessions:

- We enter into the last three sessions of our series with a slight change of format.
- In this session we will cover the literary analysis of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.
- In the next session we will do the same for the parable of the judging of the nations.
- In the final session we will offer some joint reflections on them both- a shared reflection session.

The Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Some Helpful Contextual Themes in Matthew

- There are other stories in Matthew where Jesus makes comparisons of himself to the bridegroom, fasting when the bridegroom is taken (Matt 9:15), and also of the Kingdom being likened to a wedding banquet that requires a response, and wedding garment, on the part of the invited guests in Matthew 22.

The location of this parable in Matthew's Gospel text:

- By this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is at the threshold of the Last Supper and his arrest, Passion, and death.
- These stories are part of his final teachings that he offers before the Passion.
- They are commonly called the "eschatological" discourses, which means a focus on the Second Coming, and the necessary posture/attitude of the followers of Jesus in preparation for it.
- The same discourses include the predictions of the destruction of the Temple and coming persecutions.
- Immediately prior to this parable is a warning from Jesus about the fact that his return will be unexpected and drastic.

The contents of the entire 25th Chapter of Matthew:

- The chapter consists entirely of three parables, one of which we skip over in this series.
- The first is of the wise and foolish virgins, the second of the talents given in different amounts, and the third is the judging of the nations (next session).
- Each of the three deal in different ways with the same topic of the fate of individuals, (a particular judgment), and also of the fate of the whole cosmos in the final judgement.
- A side-by-side comparison of them in the Gospel itself suggests that each of the three stories is intended to speak to different dimensions or angles of the same issue: how are we judged?

The setting and the characters of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins:

- A bridegroom, and ten maidens, attendants, or virgins.
- They are awaiting the wedding and the entry into the wedding feast.

A word about weddings in ancient Judaism:

- A man marrying a woman had to enter into dowry negotiations with the father/family of the future wife before the marriage could be entered into and concluded.
- He would go to the home of the bride's father, where she lived with her family, to complete these arrangements and then bring her back to his own home. Then the wedding banquet could begin.
- Presumably the ten virgins in this story would be the wedding party whose obligation it is to be immediately at the service of the groom once the terms were concluded and the wedding could commence.
- They were to watch for his return. In this story, the groom is long delayed in his negotiations and in his return.
- The wise bring enough oil, the foolish do not. All fall asleep, but only some are prepared for a long wait.

What is the oil supposed to symbolize? Some had enough and some did not.

- Maybe good deeds, maybe consistent, prayerful watchfulness, maybe obedience to the commandments. Maybe the attitude of perseverance in the face of challenges and opposition to discipleship.
- The wise ones made ready for a long wait and for an unexpected return, as any good disciple must be.
- The foolish virgins believe they can bargain with the wise ones to make up for their lack of preparations, as though one could trade or share one's good works with someone else.
- Or as though one could borrow another's different attitude. Each person is free to, and required to, prepare their own heart, mind, and life. No one can do it for them.

What is the twist of the parable?

- Less obvious in this parable. Possibly the statement by the Bridegroom that he does not know his own attendants and that the door being locked is so final.

What does the story reveal about the Kingdom of God and about the Lord?

- Why would God choose to analogize his return with a wedding feast? God desires to explain himself to us as a groom to a bride, and his ultimate return as having the joy, celebration, and consummation of a marriage union.
- For the prepared, vigilant believer, the second coming is like a wedding feast full of joy, abundance, union, and new life. [more on this in the last video]

- The Kingdom of God is in a state of journeying toward completion that will only reach its fullness at the second coming.
- Its completion, the completion of God's reigning among us, requires a final coming by the Lord.
- God has already given us all the warning we need. It is now up to us to stay vigilant. A defining mark of a follower of the Lord, of the Kingdom, is vigilance.
- God will close the window on our chance to choose or reject him at the time of our own, personal, earthly death which we cannot predict.
- The same is true of closing the window on the entire world's chance to choose him, at an hour we do not know. As persons must watch, so the world must watch.

In comparison to the parables after it in Matthew 25:

- By comparison to the next parables which all focus on judgement, the unique emphasis of this story of the virgins is the need for vigilance in preparation.
- The next parable of the talents emphasizes the need for multiplying followers, evangelizing, in preparation for his coming and as criterion for how the chosen recipients of the Gospel will be judged.
- The last parable of the judging of the nations focuses on how the rest of the world will be judged, and also how believers will be judged to the extent they respond to the presence of Christ in the marginalized.

"I do not know you," and "the door was locked."

- The recognition by the Lord that is part of salvation requires our efforts to stay in his friendship and mercy.
- There will be a time when the window of opportunity to repair any damage to our friendship with him will close.

What does the parable reveal about our nature?

- That we need reminding. We have a tendency to drowsiness.
- We tend to take God's recognition, mercy, and grace for granted if there are no consequences.

What choice of conversion does this parable demand of us?

- We should never presume that we will have tomorrow to shape up. Any shaping up that needs to be done should be done today.
- We would be wise not to gloss over the hard passages from the Lord that speak of consequences.
- This parable is a direct splash of cold water in the face, and a corrective to the currently dominant image of Jesus as a wishy-washy, perpetually tolerant figure who never tells anyone "no."
- Jesus is not a soft, cartoon character. Jesus is Lord with the power to condemn us to Hell.

- This should fill us with a healthy sense of fear of the Lord that guards against presumption of his mercy and taking his graces for granted.
- The workers in the vineyard story is all about God's generosity even to last-minute believers, but that story and this one still show that because we are free, there are limits.
- Our freedom requires it, or we are not really free to choose. Because God takes us seriously, he can lock the door on those who choose to fall away and do not repent.

End of Session Ten