

## Matthew 25:1-13 No Second Chances

### Introduction

The events described here by Jesus were extremely familiar to His hearers. A wedding banquet is about to take place in the home of the groom. Remember that a year earlier at the betrothal ceremony all the legal niceties have been taken care of, this wedding will consist of a celebratory service and the party to follow. Many family members and friends are present to share the joyful celebrations. As the assembled crowd gathers, the groom, together with a few close friends makes his way to the home of the bride, which was assumed to be either in the same community or in a nearby village or town. The groom will collect his bride and escorts her back to his family home, where the marriage feast takes place. The bride will have usually ten girlfriends dressed in white who will accompany her on the journey to her new husband's parents' home [S. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 129]. The groom and his friends will wait at the bride's home till she is ready to set off and when that time comes she is placed on the back of a donkey and the happy group set off on a meandering route to his home. They take a long route wandering down many streets in their community to indicate the nature of their celebrations and allow other people to offer their congratulations. This process could take many hours and unlike modern Western culture there was no fixed arrival time. Weddings at that time in the Middle East normally took place in the seven months of the hot and cloudless summer. It is of no consequence that people are waiting out in the evening, even for part of the night, for the groom and bride to arrive as the cooler air was probably more refreshing than earlier in the day [K.E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, pp. 271-2]. A wedding was a community occasion. Particular days of the week were chosen for the wedding and reflected the status of the bride. A virgin would be married on a Wednesday and a widow, for example, on a Thursday [Ketubot 1:1, LL. Morris, *Matthew*, p.621]. Processions from the bride's home normally took place after dark and were torch-lit which added to the drama of the situation. The context in which Jesus told this story is the same as His message on the signs of the end of the age in Matthew 24. He is near the Temple in Jerusalem and although talking to His disciples, He may have been joined by a growing number of other people eager to hear what Jesus was saying. As with other parables He told, Jesus will take a scene very familiar to all His hearers and use it to convey a spiritual truth. The question before us is simply this: in a context of teaching about the end times and awaiting His second coming, the wedding scene before us invites us to reflect on how this ordinary life situation relates to our own lives in a very different social context more than twenty centuries later.

### 1. The Character of the young women (Matthew 25:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish and five were wise. Jesus' story focuses on a small number of young women attending a wedding. Each of them has a lamp and all ten of them are pictured as having lit their lamps. In that cultural context a young man was not expected to carry a lamp with him when out after dark, but women, young and old, were assumed to adopt this practice. The main purpose of the lamp was not to provide light to walk outside after dark, as the starlight or moonlight was usually sufficient to see by in the dry, clear air of the Middle East. Carrying a lamp was deemed appropriate to safeguard the woman's moral integrity. With the light of the lamp shining on their face they were highly visible and no-one could harass them in a public place without being visible. The lamps were held directly in front of their faces so that every other person out walking on that street could observe who they are and possibly where they were going. Therefore, Jesus' hearers quickly

pick up that all the participants in this parable are virtuous young women. Their intentions in being out late that evening were entirely honourable and directly associated with the forthcoming wedding celebrations. They had no other purpose for being outside their homes. In other words each of them was assumed to be a believing Jew who wished to share in the joy of the occasion. These were not words intended for people outside the faith community directly, although all Scripture is profitable for all of us; its primary audience, in particular passages, may be a smaller group of people who are outside the faith or in this case within it. As these verses are in our Bibles we can contextualise the story for ourselves and picture the ten young women as professing Christians awaiting the second coming of Jesus. Every one claims that they are looking forward to the coming of Jesus. There would be something wrong if this was not the case! However, Jesus adds a qualifying statement about the picture He has painted: <sup>2</sup> *Five of them were foolish and five were wise.* How is it we may ask can some Christians be considered wise and others foolish in the light of His coming? Jesus will point us to see that it concerns how ready we are for His coming and how prepared we are for that occasion. Can I ask you a question? If Jesus was definitely coming back to earth in the next twenty-four hours would it change your plans? If it would, why would that be the case? Would there be sins to confess to Him? Would there be wrong words to apologise for to another brother or sister? Would there be inappropriate conduct we would be seeking to put right now, rather than Him asking us about it in public when we stand before the Lord at His judgement seat (II Corinthians 5:10)? If one of these suggestions strikes a chord, Jesus would say to us please deal with the issue today, don't put it off, you never know which day I will return. I want you to live in a manner that you would be comfortable with on the day of My unexpected return. Our intolerance of sin and wrongdoing in our personal lives and collective community witness must be faced as if Jesus' return was imminent, even if it turns out to be after we have left this life. This parable also will point to priorities. How many of us as we get older have exactly the same priorities as we did in our youth? Are we wiser now and therefore living more closely to Jesus' way than we did when much busier in our youth when starting a career or raising a family? Or were once passionate about serving the Lord and nothing was too much trouble, but now we do our bit but don't want to go the second mile because 'other people' wouldn't do so? Jesus said of these companions of the bride some solemn words: *Five of them were foolish and five were wise.* Observers passing these girls in the street would never have come to such a conclusion as they all looked the part. In a local congregation God's people can all look the part on a Sunday in a worship service, but what is going in your heart and mine? Remember the words the Lord spoke to Samuel when choosing a son of Jesse to anoint as King over Israel in place of Saul: *The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*" (I Samuel 16:7). Am I, are you, represented by a wise or a foolish attendant in this story? No-one else here can answer this question for anyone else; it is between each one of us and the Lord. —

## **2. The Preparation by the young women** (Matthew 25:3-5)

<sup>3</sup> *The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.* <sup>4</sup> *The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.* <sup>5</sup> *The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.* Everyone knew that these occasions could be long and drawn out so it was normal practice for attendants of the bride to take with them extra olive oil in a small flask or container. The girls in the story and in real life at a wedding at that time would have made their way to the bride's home and waited outside. They would have lit their lamps when their journey had commenced and would have carefully placed their burning lamps on a window ledge or other appropriate place where they would have burnt out a short time later.

If, as is often suggested, it was the normal custom for the groom to arrive fairly late in the evening up to the middle of the night then it would have been sensible for them to try and get some sleep. Jesus in the story does not condemn the participants for getting their necessary rest. They are expected to take reasonable care of their health and be prudent with their preparations for the forthcoming event. Businesses were run from home in that culture. So an attendant short of oil would have known where to go to replenish her supplies in that village and could have done so at any point in the evening. If it was late the trader may have had to be woken from his bed and that would have taken some time, but a purchase would not have been a problem. Jesus noted that: <sup>3</sup> *The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.* <sup>4</sup> *The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.* The resources were available, but incredibly five young ladies chose to wait for the bridegroom in an inappropriate way. The lamps were usually long sticks with rags wrapped tightly around one end. The rags were soaked in olive oil and once lit would burn brightly for around fifteen minutes before some more oil needed to be applied. The crowd listening to this story would have struggled to understand how any bridal attendant would act in this fashion. They would all have identified with the wise young women in the story. How does this apply to us today? Jesus would suggest to us, I believe, that to live our lives for Him in our own strength is a foolish course of action. We need to make time to read God's Word each day and reflect upon it and to give some time to prayer; we need the empowering resources of the Holy Spirit to fill us and enable us to be the witnesses God desires us to be. We need to be regular in attendance in God's house on His day and at other times to make the right choices about how we use our time and gifts and finances and everything else we possess that we may bring honour to the Lord. All these attendants were believers yet Jesus called some wise and others foolish. The time for the bridegroom coming was longer than expected, but that was no excuse as they had been warned to be ready when he came; all these girls had chosen to be in the right place, but half of them would be of use to the bride and bridegroom and the others considerably less so. Why is it that some Christians are so willing to put themselves out to serve the Lord and His people and others so reluctant? Why is it that some Christians not only give tithes and offerings, but also give sacrificially to God's work from the finances entrusted to them and yet others redeemed by Jesus on the cross give only from their spare change? Jesus speaks here of people who are wise and others who are foolish –in which category are you /am I? Jesus expects an answer from us.

### **3. The Request from the young women** (Matthew 25:6-10a)

<sup>6</sup> *“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’* <sup>7</sup> *“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.* <sup>8</sup> *The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’* <sup>9</sup> *“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’* <sup>10</sup> *“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. When Jesus came to earth the Jewish people were often speaking about the coming of the Messiah in their synagogues, as they had done for generations. However, they were not ready for Him. There were exceptions of course, such as Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38) Luke described Simeon in this way: *Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.* <sup>26</sup> *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah* (Luke 2:25-26). He also wrote this of Anna: *she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem* (Luke 2:38). The solemn challenge given by Jesus is that Jews or Gentiles who believe in God and look forward to His coming will not all have been living in a manner consistent with preparing for His return. What needed to be done by half these attendants was*

a simple task that would only have taken a very short time. It was well within their capabilities to have carried it out but they didn't. The Lord does not expect the impossible from us. He does not require us to work for Him twenty-five hours out of every twenty-four! An even more serious point must be raised for anyone here who has not trusted Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Do you realise that this world is not the end of life, there is a heaven and a hell awaiting those who have prepared adequately for eternity and those who have ignored that reality until it was too late respectively. This is a most solemn and important matter. In this life nothing is more important. Each of us has to realise that a holy and perfect God cannot allow unforgiven sinners into heaven. He has sent His one and only Son into the world to show us how to live and then to die in our place on the cross. If God could have provided salvation any other way than through the sacrifice of His Son –do you not think He would have done it? The foolish attendants lived as if all was well instead of taking action to remedy their situation. It was not lack of opportunity, rather a lack of willingness to take action. Is that your problem –you know your need of Jesus, but have not been bothered to cry out to Him to save you and commit your life to Him? Matthew 25:6-8 records: *“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’”*<sup>7</sup> *“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.”*<sup>8</sup> *The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’”*<sup>9</sup> *“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.* The wise virgins in the story were not mean in declining the request from their panic –stricken companions. They knew that the stores of olive oil they possessed was limited and had they shared then none of them would have been able to fulfil their responsibilities to light the way for the bride on her triumphant procession to the house of the bridegroom. Christians, if they only they could, would willingly share their gift of salvation with unsaved friends and family members, but we cannot make people Christians; each individual must ask Jesus for salvation on a personal basis. There was no shortage of olive oil in the village they needed to go and get it –it took effort. They heard the cry: *Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!* -what was their response? A mad dash to the oil-seller in the early hours of the morning; naturally, before the days of twenty-four hour trading in big supermarkets, the shop-keeper would not be expecting customers in the early hours. He would have to get out of his bed and get suitably dressed and go to his place of supply. All this took time, but the purchases were made and the five young ladies rushed back to the house of the bride. However, the story reported: *“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet (Matthew 25:10).* The bridal party did not wait. All those who were ready set off to the house either in another part of the village or another community where the bridegroom lived. The indication of timescales given here implies that the trip to the trader took longer than the triumphal procession. The very honour for which these girls had been chosen had passed them by. The reward for friendship with the bride had been lost. One day you and I will stand before Jesus on the day of judgement not because we might potentially lose our salvation – that is impossible. Romans 11:29 reminds us that: *God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable.* We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone! God accepts you and me because Jesus was good enough. When He looks at you and me He sees the perfect righteousness of Jesus and says welcome because of His love for His beloved Son, our substitute and sin-bearer. However, what Jesus will declare is what rewards, if any, particular believers will be given for service here on earth. I Corinthians 3:10b-15 notes that some Christians will live lives that are a major investment in heaven and the impact of their Christian service will have eternal consequences for the blessing of many people. Sadly others will lead equally active lives, but what they have done will be primarily of benefit down here and of less or limited lasting effect; what is worst of all some Christians will get into heaven but will have done nothing to commend them. How sad that is! Christian love is

shown by our actions and our words. It is deeply practical, acting in a Christ-like way. Wise Christians invest their limited time and resources for the good of their families; for God's church; for other people in a variety of contexts and for their own spiritual well-being. Our time here on earth is so limited. We cannot assume how long we have to live. On the day I wrote this message I had a brief conversation with a Baptist colleague in pastoral ministry who had taken four men's funerals in the past three weeks –the oldest man was in his thirties. This is not a call to forget a work-rest balance as God in the creation week in Genesis 1-2 modelled for us a pattern of labour and cessation from labour to enjoy the wonders of His creation. By contrast it is a challenge to work wisely and to choose what is most important in our priorities, in order to accomplish the most we can with the gifts entrusted to us by God.

#### **4. The Consequences for some young women (Matthew 25:10b-13)**

*And the door was shut.* <sup>11</sup> “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ <sup>12</sup> “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ <sup>13</sup> “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. However fast they walked or ran to the house where the celebrations were taking place, it was not fast enough. Jesus solemnly declared: *And the door was shut* (Matthew 25:10). The reward to which they would have been honoured by the bride and groom was lost because they had not disciplined themselves to prepare for that occasion. May we not miss out on blessings God has for us because of wrong choices or priorities in our lives. Sometimes we have decisions to make and struggle to discern which pathway to take because both seem equally plausible. However, we can but pray and take the best advice we can and step out in faith along the pathway in life we believe the Lord would have us take. The Middle-Eastern audience would be very familiar with this kind of negotiation and not be in the least bit troubled by the initial response of the bridegroom. One of the leading Christian scholars of this culture, Kenneth Bailey, made this comment: ‘In the Middle East the word *no* is never an answer, rather it is a pause in the negotiations.’ (*Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 273) In the end the bridegroom would let them in and as the feasting continued often for several days, unlike our cultural custom of one day’s celebrations, in chronological terms they had not missed the majority of the wedding celebrations. However, the embarrassment would live with them in that community: ‘Do you remember the five attendants who showed up a couple of hours late for the wedding.....?’ This story has its focus on the second coming of Jesus and concludes with these words in Matthew 25:13: “*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour* when Jesus will return. May each of us live now in a way that ensures we are ready for His coming whenever that may be, for His name’s sake, Amen.