

Matthew 25:1 – 46

^{25:1} 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

- The ten virgins were probably asked to lead a procession at the wedding.
- 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.
- 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.'

^{25:14} 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

- Doubling the money (Mt.25:20, 22) is modest, not that significant. If they had chosen to do illegal things, or oppress people, they could have gotten a lot more.
- A talent is the largest monetary unit (20.4 kg of silver), equal to 6,000 drachmas, the wages of a manual laborer for fifteen years.
- The master rewards the productive servants with ‘many things’ (Mt.25:21, 23). In Luke’s version of this parable, the master rewards those servants with ‘cities’ (Lk.19:11 – 27), probably meaning the administration or rule of those cities. So the implication in Matthew is that the reward is disproportionate.

^{25:31} 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

- Jesus only identified *his disciples* as ‘these brothers of mine’ (25:40)
 - ^{12:46} While he was still speaking to the crowds, behold, his mother and brothers [*adelphois*] were standing outside, seeking to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone said to him, ‘Behold, your mother and your brothers [*adelphois*] are standing outside seeking to speak to you.’ ⁴⁸ But Jesus answered the one who was telling him and said, ‘Who is my mother and who are my brothers [*adelphois*]?’ ⁴⁹ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Behold my mother and my brothers [*adelphois*]!’ ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother [*adelphoi*] and sister and mother.’
 - ^{23:8} But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers [*adelphois*].
 - ^{28:10} Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and take word to my brethren [*adelphois*] to leave for Galilee, and there they will see me.’
- God’s identification with His people as a biblical theme:
 - ^{Gen.12:1} Now the LORD said to Abram... ² ‘I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; ³ and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.’
 - ^{Zech.2:8} For thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘After glory He has sent me against the nations which plunder you, for he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye.’
 - ^{Acts 9:3} And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’
 - ^{1 Cor.3:16} Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ 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.

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! Jesus is stressing PARTICIPATION in what he does.
 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. But is that perception true? Does the master monopolize everything his servants do? No, actually. Quite the opposite. The master rewards his servants with ‘many things’ (Mt.25:21, 23) and even ‘cities’ (Lk.19:11 – 27), for getting a very modest return on the investment that he gave them to invest with! The master is not a hard man. He’s a generous man. He doesn’t monopolize rewards. He is glad for others to share and participate in what he’s doing.
 - 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, and perceives him in a wrong and fact-free way. That’s the problem being highlighted here.
 - v. Is it harsh for the master to cast the third servant ‘into the outer darkness’? I do not think the third servant repented of his view. That’s because ‘darkness’ is how Jesus describes the experience of a person who is blind. It’s not that Jesus inflicts darkness as darkness on anyone. Jesus is light. But those who refuse to see by him and by his light, see nothing. More on that can be found here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf>.
- 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.’
 - ii. Because of the larger theme of God identifying Himself with His people.
 - 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... Huh?
 - 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!

