

Get Ready!

The Bible's classic End Times passage is Matthew 24. This teaching is immediately followed by three parables; The Parable of the Ten Virgins, the Parable of the Talents, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. We will consider the Talents in session 2, then the Sheep and Goats in session 8, but today's session is the wise and foolish virgins.

Read Matthew 25:1–13.

Jesus is speaking with his disciples and uses a parable to bring application to the lengthy teaching about the End Times. A parable is not an allegory where every detail may have a hidden meaning; this parable is a simple story that illustrates one truth, and Jesus tells us what that truth is, "Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (25:13).

Only the Father knows

Jesus has already told the disciples that no-one knows the time of his return including himself; only the Father knows (24:36). This truth is repeated by Jesus in Acts 1:7, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."

There are two interesting truths here;

(1) Jesus possesses omniscience, all knowledge, yet chooses to limit his knowledge about the time of his return. This does not diminish his deity but highlights his willing subordination to the Father.

(2) The day of his return has been set by the Father and is outside the scope of human knowledge. Therefore, if you hear anyone say, "I know when Jesus will return" they are deceiving themselves. How arrogant for someone to claim they know something not even Jesus knows! If it were possible to accurately predict the time of his return, there would be no need to be ready. But it is both unbiblical and foolish to try to predict the time of his return; we just have to be ready.

Get ready!

Jesus outlined numerous "signs of the times" in Matthew 24. These signs have always occurred in history and like a pebble thrown into a pond the ripples keep expanding in ever-increasing circles. Our response is simple; "Keep watch" (24:42); "You must be ready for the Son of Man will come

at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:44). Jesus then tells a parable about a wedding banquet as an illustration about being ready.

In Jewish culture, once a betrothal has been announced, the prospective bridegroom will start making additions to the family home to accommodate his bride. When the building was ready and received the father’s approval, the bridegroom would go to the bride’s home and bring her to their new home. This is quite different to our culture where the groom awaits the arrival of the bride.

The bride would hear news of the progress of the building additions. She would know the time of the wedding was getting closer, but the day and hour would still be unknown to her; she simply had to be ready. Jesus said there are many rooms in Father’s house, “I am going there to prepare, make ready a place for you. If I go, I will come back and take you to be with me” (John 14:2–3).

The twist in the tale

Parables would often have a twist in the story that highlighted the key truth that was being taught. Twists such as an injured traveller on the road to Jericho being helped by a Samaritan; imagine that! Workers hired at 5 pm were paid first and received a full day’s pay; that’s wrong! An unworthy prodigal returns and receives a wonderful welcome; that’s outrageous! And at midnight, a lamp without any oil; how foolish!

It is difficult to believe that someone would take a lamp but no oil. They were careless, thoughtless and senseless; deemed to be foolish, stupid, dull and empty headed. The word wise means to be sensible, they used their heads. The foolish virgins were simply not ready.

An essential part of being ready is having oil or fuel for your lamp. The Christian life is empowered or fuelled by the Holy Spirit of whom oil is an emblem. Therefore, part of our readiness is being empowered by the Spirit’s fuel. A paraphrase of “Be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18) is, “it is imperative for us individually and corporately to allow God to continually fill us with his Spirit.” Why? Because the oil of the Spirit raises the level of our readiness.

The focus is the bridegroom

In a western culture, a wedding is centred on the bridal couple and in particular the bride. But in this parable there is no mention of the bride; whilst the bridegroom is mentioned three times. The focus is the bridegroom and being ready for his arrival.

The book of Revelation mentions several entities; there is the woman and the red dragon; there are the two witnesses and the 144,000; there is the antichrist and his false prophet; and there is “the mark of the beast”. There has been endless debate as to their identities, but it is only speculation and opinion. The focus of the End Times is Jesus; we do not wait for the Antichrist to appear, we have our eyes fixed on Jesus. “This same Jesus will come back” (Acts 1:11); “we wait for the blessed hope; the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

But where is the bride?

The ten virgins are attendants or guests, they are not the bride. Where is she? Jesus gave this parable before the cross; the old covenant was still in play. Yet Jesus had seen “the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2). He had already spoken of “the other sheep” he has, that are not of this sheep pen (Israel), and declared “I must bring them also. There shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). He spoke of the “many from the east and west who will take their places with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11). The joy that was set before him was you and I; a bride comprising both Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 3:28).

Where is the bride? Paul defines the bride as “the mystery of Christ that was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:4–6). Where is the bride? She is hidden away in the purposes of God and about to be birthed on the Day of Pentecost.

Other points

“The bridegroom was a long time coming” (Matt. 25:5). Throughout the Bible there are delays between a promise and its fulfilment. Abraham and Sarah waited many years for their promised son; for Joseph there was the delay of 22 years before the dreams were fulfilled; Moses endured a 40 year delay in the wilderness.

It would appear that some first century Christians expected the Lord to return during their lifetime. Twenty centuries later we must ask, did they get it wrong? No, in one sense every generation is the last generation; and each should live with the expectation of his return. Scoffers will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised?” (2 Pet. 3:4). But “in just a very

little while, He who is coming will come and not delay; we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed; but of those who believe and are saved” (Heb. 10:37–39). Despite the delay, we must stay ready.

“At midnight the cry rang out” (Matt. 25:6). In the parable the bridegroom arrived at midnight; an awkward time, a totally unexpected time. Midnight is symbolic of darkness and desperation. “The Doomsday Clock” is a metaphor that represents how close humanity is to self-destruction. This year, 2024, the Bureau of Atomic Scientists has set the time at 90 seconds to midnight. If a bureau of secular scientists is declaring it is late, how much more should we as believers in Christ, understand the signs and be ready.

“Give us some of your oil” (25:8); but the oil is non-transferrable. No one can get to heaven because of the faith of another person. There are some things that cannot be borrowed and there are some things that cannot be obtained at the last minute. We have to be ready.

“And the door was shut” (25:10). The word shut means to be secured with bars, locked, emphatically shut and to stay shut. There is a sense of terrible finality; once the day of opportunity has passed, it has passed for ever. This links back to the days of Noah when “the Lord shut him in” (Gen. 7:16). The foolish virgins pleaded for the door to be opened, but it was too late. We have to be ready.

“Therefore keep watch” (25:13), the phrase is repeated from Matthew 24:42. How do we stay ready? We are going to conclude this study by suggesting some practical ways that we can do to be ready.

Next week, session 2, “Get Busy – The Parable of the Talents”

Suggested answers about how to stay ready.

1. Keep being filled with the Spirit. The wise virgins were Spirit-filled; the foolish virgins were Spirit-less. It is totally wrong to think that only 'Pentecostal' people will make it to heaven; no denomination has a mortgage on heaven.
2. Keep watching the signs of the times and in particular Israel and Jerusalem. Much of the End Time prophecy is centred on the Middle East. We should pray for the peace of Jerusalem; and we should pray for a spiritual outpouring on both Jews and Arabs.
3. Keep in fellowship; "Let us not give up meeting together, all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb.10:25); and celebrating communion, "until he comes".
4. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus; don't be distracted by people or the events happening around you.