

THE TEN VIRGINS

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:1-13

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five of them were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them; But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made. Behold the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone (Margin "going") out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so: lest there be not enough for us and you; but go rather to them that sell, and buy for yourself. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage; and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily, I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

In order to understand the significance of Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins, it is well to know something of the marriage customs of the time. At the legal ceremony of betrothal the contractual terms of the marriage were settled, and from that time the marriage was regarded as binding, even though still unconsummated. As the day of marriage approached, the wedding feast was prepared at the home of the groom's parents. The groom went for the day to the home of a relative or friend, in order that he might not be in the way while the women prepared the feast and decked the house for the evening's festivities. The wedding feast was always held at night. The marriage consisted simply of bringing the already accredited bride to the home of her covenanted husband. As the day closed, the friends of the bridegroom gathered to him in the house to which he had gone for the day, and prepared to go with to escort the bride and her attendants from her home to the home of the groom where the marriage feast would be held. Before leaving it was the custom for each friend of the bridegroom to make a more or less lengthy speech of congratulation to the groom, and since some of the groom's friends might be delayed in arriving, and delayed still longer by the lengthy speeches, it might be as late as midnight before the bridegroom set out for the bride's house.

Meantime the bride and all her attendants were ready and waiting, and it would be quite natural for them to become drowsy and perhaps drop off to sleep. When all the speeches had been heard, the bridegroom and his friends, all carrying lighted torches set out for the home of the bride, where she and her attendants also joined the procession, carrying torches to light the couple through the pitch-black streets to the groom's house and the wedding feast. Arrived there a few invited friends were taken inside with the bride and groom; the others, who had merely served as an escort, would quietly depart and call the next day to offer congratulations. Then the door was shut so that the feast might continue without unwelcome intrusion.

In the parable, the ten virgins were those who waited with the bride for the coming of the bridegroom. They were to be part of the light-bearing escort which would accompany the procession from the bride's house to the home of the groom where the wedding feast was prepared. The lamps or torches they carried were probably the flat, shallow pottery lamps of the East. The capacity of these lamps was limited; and since no one knew how long the speeches would last before the bridegroom called for the bride, the wise maidens took along extra vessels or flasks filled with a reserve

of oil. The foolish virgins gave no thought to this possibility. They had only the small amount of oil in their lamps, when common sense would have dictated that they anticipate a delay by providing a reserve.

Notice that there is no hint in the parable that these ten virgins were divided into good and bad. They were all good. Outwardly they looked the same, and acted the same. They were all dressed in the finery befitting the occasion. Five were wise, prudent, sensible; and five were foolish. Five were prepared, and five were unprepared. Five had the external sign of inner resources -- the lamp and it's lighted wick; but only five were actually supplied with those inner resources which enabled them to keep the lamp burning during a delay which could have easily been foreseen and prepared for. In the parable then, the lamp may stand for the outward profession of righteousness: the oil for all that is inward, for hidden righteousness, for inward spiritual resources, for all that sustains the outward appearance.

Many people who have an incomplete understanding of the wedding customs of the east have concluded that the five wise virgins were selfish and un-Christian because they refused to share their oil with the foolish ones. While they slept, the lamps burned on, so as to be ready the instant the cry was heard announcing the bridegroom's coming. When the cry awoke them, the foolish observed that the oil in their lamps was running low; their lamps were going out, and they asked to borrow some oil. But the wise virgins probably considered the situation thus: Their duty was to furnish light for the procession as it moved from the bride's house to the house of the groom. Ten lights were needed. But if the distance were very great, dividing the oil supply for five lamps among ten might mean that ALL lamps would go out before the procession reached it's destination; and there would be no light at all. It was their duty to make sure that the light of those five lamps continued to the end of the procession. Dividing a meager supply of oil might mean that the bride would have no light at all. That, and not their selfishness is the real reason why they refused to divide.

The lesson of this parable of course is the lesson of preparedness -- preparedness for the second coming of Christ, the bridegroom, to claim his bride, the church. The Christians expected that advent to occur within their lifetime, but we are still waiting. Sometimes it seems as if the waiting will never end. With good reason, we may all become weary, and slumber and sleep. There is no condemnation of this weariness or this sleep in the parable. The condemnation is that only five slept in expectation and in preparedness, while five just slept, when all those whose duty it was to light the wedding procession should have been prepared.

Those who would enter the wedding feast in the kingdom of God must be prepared. Such preparation is individual. It is not enough that those around us should prepare, that our families or friends or neighbors should prepare. This preparation for the kingdom cannot be shared, and the door of the Kingdom is open only to those who are prepared. Not because God is selfish or exclusive, but because that is the very nature of things. The door of the art museum is open every day, but unless I am prepared by knowing something of the techniques of art, the history of art and of artists, the things that make a painting or piece of sculpture great, the door to the art museum in a sense is closed to me. Vast amounts of good music are available by radio, on television, and in innumerable music halls. The door is open, but not to the man who is not prepared by study and analysis to appreciate what is inside. The door to the kingdom is open, but not to those who have failed to prepare themselves to use and appreciate and enjoy what is therein. I cannot prepare for you; you cannot prepare for me. The virtue of one cannot cancel out or make amends for the vices or the shortcomings of another. We cannot share the oil of our preparation with another.

The representation of the kingdom in this parable as a marriage feast, with all its joyousness and hospitable, friendly feeling is significant. Entering the kingdom is rightfully a joyous experience. Preparation for that entrance is a joyful, not a lugubrious process. It is a preparation for the best, not for the worst. Day by day let us fill the reservoirs of our spiritual power and spiritual resources, that we shall have oil for our lamps when the bridegroom cometh.