

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

1 **“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.**

6 **“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ 7 “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ 9 “‘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.’**

10 **“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. 11 “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ 12 “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ 13 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.**

In Jesus’ parables there is usually **one** important **point of comparison** between the story Jesus tells and our life of faith. Sometimes there might two, or even three, but if you understand the one key point, you will understand the parable.

When we read this story in Matthew 25, we are faced with a whole **basketful** of details to sift through. But then we need to ask, which ones are important? Are some of the details things to be passed over?

Let’s start with the thing that’s the most difficult for us: **the ancient Jewish wedding**. Usually, the parents arranged a marriage: this was the betrothal, but the couple still lived at home with their parents. After a while—weeks or months—the couple would hold a banquet that began with the groom (which they used to call “the bridegroom,” a word which means the man who takes care of his bride) bringing the bride to his home in a procession that was kind of a parade. There was no wedding ceremony like the ones we have today. The banquet continued for a whole week—and the marriage had begun.

In our parable, Jesus tosses out most of these details and introduces a couple of things that would have seemed absurd to his listeners. These things would have really gotten their attention.

But now we can identify one detail in the parable. It’s important, and there are at least two more that are equally important, but let’s begin by saying that Jesus himself is the **bridegroom**. However, in the parable, there’s **no mention of the “bride.”** And instead of **the bridesmaids—the ten virgins—escorting the bride** through the streets, it’s strange

that Jesus only talks about the groom and the bridesmaids, but those are the relationships he wants us to aim our attention at.

So are the ten virgins, the bridesmaids, all humanity, **or** are they something else? Well, in the parable, they look the same on the outside, and they're all carrying lamps. Since they want to get in to the wedding banquet—and it's at least pretty clear that the banquet is eternal life in heaven—then we need to understand that these virgins represent what we call the **Visible Church**.

The Visible Church everybody who says with their words or actions that they are Christians. But some people might not really be what they say they say they are. So these pretend Christians—these **hypocrites**—are represented by the foolish virgins. We don't need to worry about the division of “five” and “five” – Jesus is just making the math easy on us.

So if the wise virgins are genuine believers, and the foolish virgins are not, what is the oil? What are the lamps? What are the wicks?

Well, we need to explain what these things were in the story. Since they were meant to burn for a long time, and even outdoors, they probably weren't the little clay tabletop lamps we sometimes think of, but rather, they were **probably torches**. A torch is a big stick with oily rags tied at one end that will burn for twenty minutes or so, and then the burnt, charred rags need to be trimmed and cut away, so that more rags can be soaked with oil and lit on fire—which is the main reason why this part of the story did not become our children's devotion today/tonight.

So **the oil is genuine Christian faith**. If we misunderstand this part, we will get the point of the parable wrong, and we will fall into thinking that we can buy our way into heaven, or that our actions influence our salvation.

When the **long time of waiting ends** and **Christ the bridegroom** appears, the **sleep** of death will end for most, and the long sleep of waiting will end for those of us who are still alive on the earth, and the **cry** will come at the **unexpected hour of midnight: Wake up, Sleepers!** Time for the resurrection, and for the Judgement!

People listening to Jesus would have thought: How foolish to run out of oil for your torch before a wedding! Nobody can buy oil at midnight. **But Jesus says this to show how foolish it would be**—even more foolish—to expect that the saving faith, genuine faith offered by God throughout our lifetimes, could somehow be gotten at the last minute between the moment when Christ comes again to judge, and the moment of judgment.

So how prepared is the oil of your faith? **Foolish oil is faith without trust in Christ**. Wise faith is putting all your trust, all of your heart, in the man Jesus, on the cross. Without the cross, this parable will not help anybody. In fact, without the cross (which was just three away for Jesus and the people who were listening to him) without the cross, this parable will only throw people into a panic about trying to buy their way into heaven.

But Isaiah has already explained that part: **“You who have no money, come, buy, and eat! Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen! Listen to me—to the gospel—and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”** (Isa. 55:1-2) Listening to the Gospel is the only kind of buying that’s required. Listening and believing and trusting is how we get it. We are saved because: “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.” (2nd Article)

How will **you** keep your oil supplied? Keep coming to hear. Keep reading to understand. Keep on meditating, studying, probing the word of God—and keep reminding yourself of the simplest truth we teach to our youngest infants: Jesus died for you.

While there is time, if you know someone or love someone whose **lamp is dry**, whose torch is a **dead stick**, share the gospel of Jesus. A child can do it—but if there isn’t a brave child around, you will need to **be brave** yourself. “I’m thankful this thanksgiving *that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

Jesus said, **“A smoldering wick—a smoking torch—I will not snuff out.”** That’s comforting to a family who has lost a loved one whose life of faith left something to be desired. But don’t make your family reach to a passage like that when you have laid yourself down to the long sleep of death waiting for the bridegroom to return.

You trust in Jesus your Savior. That’s a lifetime supply of the oil of Christian faith. **You are a wise virgin in this parable**—carry your torch high and keep up on that lifetime supply of the oil of genuine faith. Show your loved one how it’s done, and be an example of trust, of faith, of joy—as **we Saints Triumphant anticipate the return of the Bridegroom, and the marriage feast of heaven.** Amen.