

Delay, Judgment, and Readiness in the Parable of the ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13)

Introduction

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins is a sobering teaching from Jesus, containing warnings concerning readiness for the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the first in a series of parables taught by Jesus in Matthew 25 and is situated immediately after his teaching on the destruction of Jerusalem and the end times, commonly known as the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24). Addressed to his disciples, this teaching focuses on the delay of the Son of Man and the certainty of final judgment.

The narrative contrasts two groups of virgins, equal in number, who outwardly appear identical yet are distinguished by their preparedness when the bridegroom arrives. Central themes such as delay, exclusion, and recognition are presented to emphasise the seriousness of readiness in light of judgment. Scholars have debated the symbolism of the oil, the meaning of the bridegroom's delay, and the theological significance and consequences of the closed door.

This essay argues that Matthew 25:1–13 presents readiness for the Kingdom not as passive expectation but as an active and ongoing responsibility. Through an examination of the parable's literary context, historical background, and key theological concepts, this study will show how Matthew emphasises preparedness in contrast to spiritual delay as a defining characteristic of true discipleship.

Literary and Historical Context

The placement of this parable is immediately after the Olivet Discourse. As R.T. France notes in his commentary that the first word of the parable 'then' clearly links the parable to the preceding warning.¹

C.S. Keener in his commentary explains that Matthew has already emphasised that since the time of Jesus' coming is unknown, disciples must watch and be ready (24:36)²

Since the parable is linked to the preceding warnings in chapter 24, the parable maintains the focus on the second coming of Jesus Christ. As R.T. France comments to see Jesus being the bridegroom as warranted in the light of 9:15 and that in this context the focus is

¹ France, R. T., *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 314.

² Keener, Craig S., *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 595.

on the parousia of the Son of man.³

Having established the placement in scripture and the focus, to get a better understanding of the parable the audience is just as important particularly as this parable's narrative includes wedding preparations and the wedding itself.

C.S. Keener notes the audience is Syro-Palastinian Jewish.⁴ And he points out that Jesus' Galilean hearers knew of weddings.⁵

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 25:1-13

The narrative of the parable begins with "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. (Matthew 25:1-7 English Standard Version)

C.S. Keener explains that the audience knew of wedding processions from the bride's to the groom's house normally by night, hence the need for light and Keener⁶ like France⁷ agrees they would be torches wrapped with oiled rags.

R.T. France comments, perhaps it is reasonable to see the wedding feast as the Messianic banquet, as it was in 22:1–14.⁸ The Messianic banquet suggests to also point to the ultimate eschatological Marriage supper of the Lamb as mentioned in the book of Revelation.

The narrative continues "And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (25:8-13 ESV)

C.S. Keener comments: The issue is not that the virgins went to sleep as both wise and foolish did, the issue is that some were not watchful enough to have sufficient oil.⁹

R.T. France argues that finding specific identifications for the oil and the bridesmaids,

³ France, TNTC, p. 314

⁴ Keener, TGOM, p. 595

⁵ Keener, TGOM, p. 596

⁶ Keener, TGOM, p. 595

⁷ France, TNTC, p. 315

⁸ France, TNTC, p. 314

⁹ Keener, TGOM, p. 596

beyond their representatives of those who are ready or not, seems to be going beyond what the text requires.¹⁰

The point is that the foolish virgins were not prepared.

As the narrative moves to its conclusion.

C.S. Keener points to an imperative understanding of the wedding procession. The unwillingness of the wise virgins to share their oil reflects their concern for their friend's wedding. Having only enough for their own torches, sharing would cause all the torches to be extinguished, ruining the whole procession.¹¹

R.T. France emphasises no-one can ultimately rely on another's preparedness and the shut door makes the point that there is a 'too late' in God's time-table.¹²

Together, the commentaries of Keener and France provide complementary perspectives on the parable.

Theological Themes: Delay, Judgment and Readiness

A central theological theme in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins is delay. The bridegroom's postponed arrival reflects a concern that was already present within the Matthean community, namely how an anticipated and seemingly imminent coming could be experienced as delayed. France notes that this tension would have been particularly pressing for Matthew's audience and that the parable addresses this delay without diminishing the certainty of the bridegroom's arrival. The delay, therefore, does not negate expectation but redefines the nature of faithful waiting.¹³

Closely related to delay is the theme of readiness. The foolish virgins are not condemned for ignorance of the bridegroom's coming but for their failure to prepare adequately. As Keener observes, the lack of sufficient oil reflects a deficiency in sustained watchfulness rather than a momentary lapse.¹⁴

The unexpected midnight summons (Matt. 25:6) reinforces the demand for constant readiness and highlights that preparedness cannot be improvised at the moment of arrival. Readiness, in this parable, is portrayed as an ongoing responsibility rather than a reactive response.

The parable also conveys a strong theme of judgment, which is consistent with Matthew's wider Gospel message. The closing of the door and the bridegroom's declaration, "I do not know you" (Matt. 25:12), emphasise the finality of judgment and the consequences of unpreparedness. Matthew consistently holds together the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven with warnings concerning judgment, underscoring the seriousness of genuine

¹⁰ France, TNTC, p. 314

¹¹ Keener, TGOM, p. 598

¹² France, TNTC, p. 315

¹³ France, TNTC, p. 315

¹⁴ Keener, TGOM, p. 596

discipleship. The surprise of the foolish virgins at their exclusion reinforces the danger of presumption and superficial faith, a concern echoed elsewhere in the Gospel.¹⁵

Taken together, the themes of delay, readiness, and judgment present a coherent theological vision in which the Kingdom of Heaven demands both expectation and responsibility. The parable directs attention away from speculative eschatology and towards lived faithfulness over time. Matthew portrays the Kingdom as both promise and warning, calling disciples to sustained readiness in light of inevitable judgment and anticipated fulfilment. In this way, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins functions as both an exhortation and a warning within Matthew's Kingdom theology.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins presents a sustained warning concerning preparedness for the coming of the Son of Man, whose arrival is certain yet unpredictable. While Matthew 24 speaks of signs associated with the end, this parable shifts the focus from calculation to responsibility, emphasising readiness rather than speculation.

Keener's analysis highlights the social and cultural seriousness of wedding processions, helping to explain the gravity of the virgins' exclusion. Their failure represents not merely a missed opportunity but a breach of responsibility within a context that demanded sustained vigilance. France similarly emphasises that the bridegroom's declaration, "I do not know you," functions as a decisive statement of exclusion rather than a claim of ignorance, echoing Matthew's repeated warnings concerning superficial discipleship.

The parable therefore reinforces Matthew's broader Kingdom theology, in which privilege and proximity do not guarantee inclusion. Readiness, expressed through sustained faithfulness over time, emerges as a defining mark of genuine discipleship. In this way, the parable functions as both exhortation and warning, calling disciples to remain prepared in light of inevitable judgment and anticipated fulfilment.

Bibliography

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

France, R. T., **Matthew**, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985).

Keener, Craig S., **The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary** (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹⁵ France, TNTC, p. 315