

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Clusters of Parables: Matthew 25

Matthew 25 is part of the Lord's great prophetic discourse delivered to His disciples on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city of Jerusalem. They had heard His announcement of their nation's fate because it refused to accept Him as the Messiah: "*See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'*", 23:38-39. Perplexed, they attempted to draw His attention to the enduring grandeur of the temple, only to be told that it would be so effectively razed to the ground that not even one stone would remain on top of another, 24:1-2. Having withdrawn from the crowds to the vantage point of the mount, they privately enquired: "*Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?*" 24:3. Answers to these three questions are recorded in chapters 24 and 25.

24:4-31 form the first part of the Lord's explanation, and focus on the future conditions for the Jews in Judea, especially in Jerusalem, which will immediately precede His second coming with power and great glory. The section 24:32-25:30 is the second part of the discourse: in it there are four parables giving instructions to Christ's disciples for the intervening period between His ascension and His coming. The final part of the prophecy is given in 25:31-46: it describes the judgement of all the Gentile nations of the world when He establishes His kingdom upon earth.

From the second part of the discourse, we learn that the Lord expects His followers to remain true to Him until He comes again. The first two parables in this second section, recorded in 24:32-51, are not subjects in today's talk, but their overall theme is that His disciples should be watching out and waiting for His return by working for Him: "*Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming...also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*", 24:42 and 44. In the second of these two parables, about the faithful and wicked household servants, the Lord asks the question: "*Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?*" 24:45. He answers this question in chapter 25, in the first two parables which are to be considered in today's talk.

### The Parable of the Ten Virgins, 25:1-13

The Lord likens the kingdom of heaven to ten virgins, going to an eastern marriage feast, who went out to meet a bridegroom during the night. Although they all took their lamps with them, only half of them had spare supplies of oil. When the bridegroom was delayed, all ten went to sleep. By the time that news of the bridegroom's arrival reached them, the initial supply of oil in their lamps was running out. The five unprepared maidens had to go and find more. While they were gone the bridegroom arrived and the wedding feast started. These foolish virgins turned up late for the feast and discovered that the door was now locked. The bridegroom refused to hear their pleas for entry.

Parables about the kingdom in Matthew's Gospel are usually introduced with the words "*the kingdom of heaven is like...*" But this parable starts with the words '*the kingdom of heaven shall be likened*', verse 1, because it concerns "*the day...in which the Son of Man is coming*", verse 13. Therefore, the parable relates to a form of the kingdom, future to the Lord's words.

The kingdom of heaven can be defined as all who say that they're subject to God's rule. In today's world, it's the whole of Christendom, that is, all those people in the world who profess to be Christians. The Lord says that at the time of His return, those who profess to be His disciples will be like the ten virgins in this parable. Half of them were wise, whilst the other half were foolish. To the world at large, all Christians appear to be the same. But the distinguishing feature in the parable was that the wise took oil reserves with them. To interpret this parable, only half of them were real Christians who have the indwelling Holy Spirit (Who is pictured as oil in this parable). So each of us must ask: have I truly repented of my sins and believed the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? For, upon believing, each one is sealed with the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 1:13. It's the Holy Spirit who enables us to witness for Christ, and to shine as lights in the world, during the night time of His absence.

But the virgins had this in common, "they all became drowsy and fell asleep", verse 5 (New International Version). We know this to be true from church history. It's a fact that initial enthusiasm for Christ's soon return was lost throughout subsequent ages, and that, in general, Christendom neither expects, nor wants, its Lord to come back again! It hasn't remained awake or alert to His coming. It hasn't continued to watch for the Day; rather it has been absorbed into the

night. Now I have to admit that as I grow older, I find it increasingly more difficult to stay awake! If I sit down to read a book or to watch television, I'm soon drifting away! It's also so very difficult to stay awake at night, after a long day. Our bodies naturally want to sleep. Therefore Christians are exhorted to remain awake, in a spiritual sense: *"Let us not [go to] sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober"*, 1 Thessalonians 5:6. Paul goes on to explain in verse 7 why this is so necessary: *"For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night"*.

You may ask the question, does it matter if I don't stay awake – surely it will be a wonderful surprise when the Lord does return? The answer from this parable is clear and plain that wakefulness is a sure sign of spiritual life and alertness. Its cardinal message is that the Lord Himself commands: *"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming"*, verse 13. In recent centuries, the truth about the second coming of Christ has been recovered in successive evangelical revivals and subsequent sound biblical teaching. There's been a fulfilment of verse 6: *"at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'"*. The Lord is on His way!

The final issue in this parable is that the foolish virgins missed out on the feast altogether! The door was shut and their strong pleading, "Lord, Lord" was completely ignored by the bridegroom. He denied all knowledge of them. Such will be the solemn end of mere Christian profession. Beware therefore for: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter...but he who does the will of My Father in heaven...Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing"*, 7:21 and 24:46. As we shall see in the next parable of chapter 25, only those who truly know the Saviour will enter heaven, the true destiny of true believers. In the words of 24:45, are **you** a wise servant?

### **The Parable of the Faithful and Wicked Servants, 25:14-30**

In this parable, the Lord likens the kingdom of heaven to a man who goes abroad for a long period of time. This man commits the care and management of his possessions to those he owns, his slaves. These servants don't have any rights, only responsibilities. But he gives them all the necessary resources to carry out these tasks for him. Suitable sums of money (called talents in the parable) are allocated to each servant, in accordance with each servant's inherent ability. After a long absence, the man returns and calls these servants to account for their handling of his affairs. He discovers that the first two servants have been actively engaged in working for him. They have both doubled the number of talents given them. However, the third servant hasn't worked at all. He hands back the same amount that he had been given. He had just buried it for safe keeping. The diligent servants are very generously rewarded, but the lazy servant is severely punished.

This parable pictures the Lord ascending into heaven and leaving His disciples on earth to do His work, until He returns. From the man's commendation of his faithful servants, we're taught that the Lord expects Christians to remain faithful in their service to Him during the long period of His absence; for to each of them was said: *"Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord"*, verses 21 and 23. Believers are to use their natural abilities, enhanced by spiritual gifts, in the service of God. We'll have to account for our lives at the judgement seat of Christ, where our faithfulness will be reviewed. This means that we should always live to please Him and to be ready for His return at any time. Let's remind ourselves of His earlier words, which form the basis of these parables: *"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is a faithful and wise servant? ... Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods"*, 24:44-47.

But what about the servant who hid his talent and who was committed to everlasting punishment? Verse 24 states that this servant thought the Lord to be "a hard man". In reality he didn't know the true character of the Person he professed to serve. He didn't exhibit any features of true Christian discipleship and, in this respect, was worse than an unbeliever. He should have been busy with his Master's business in this world. This was neither difficult nor costly; for he could have invested the money, then received interest on it. He was both lazy and arrogant. He epitomises: *"that evil servant [who] says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming'"*, 24:48. His punishment is described in unmistakable terms: *"cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness [where] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"*, 25:30. Five times over in Matthew's Gospel, the Lord describes the punishment of such hypocrites, who give the pretext of being godly, but who are intrinsically evil, in these graphic terms *"weeping and gnashing of teeth"*. The end of mere profession is not only to be eternally "cut off" from "the joy of the Lord", but it's also to experience everlasting torment.

### **The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, 25:31-46.**

At the beginning of my talk, I said that these final verses of chapter 25 form the third, and final, part of the Lord's prophetic discourse. The first section of the prophecy ended with the Lord describing the manner of His appearance and the sorting activity of His angels. At that time, they'll gather together those believers living on earth who are to inherit the kingdom: *"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will*

*mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”, 24:30-31. 25:31 directly connects to these verses from chapter 24 and describes what happens next: “the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory”.*

The statements *“the Son of Man will appear...with power and great glory”* and *“He will sit on the throne of His glory”* detail how the everlasting kingdom of Christ will be established upon earth. As Son of Man, He'll become world-wide ruler after He has defeated all those nations who oppose God at the Battle of Armageddon. After that, the remaining Gentile nations are summoned to appear before the King of kings and Lord of lords, in what is called the Judgement of the Living Nations. They're segregated into two groups, represented in the parable by the sheep and the goats. The sheep are placed on the right hand of His throne, the place of acceptance; the goats go to the left, the place of rejection. Judgement is pronounced by the King: the sheep go into kingdom blessings, but the goats are dismissed for everlasting punishment. A simple criterion is used: how did these nations treat those the King calls “My brethren”? These believers are “His elect” and “the elect” named in 24:31 and 24, respectively. They're the future Jewish believers in Christ, sometimes known as the Remnant, who, during the Great Tribulation, preach that their King is coming. 24:4-42 describe the difficult environment in which they'll operate. (This preaching is called the Gospel of the Kingdom in 24:14 and, as such, is different from the Gospel of the Grace of God, which is currently being preached in this the Church age. The events described in this parable take place only after the end of the church age, that is, after all true Christians have been taken [raptured] to heaven at the coming of the Lord.)

It is interesting to notice three more points about this parable.

1. First of all, in verse 34 there's one of the rare occurrences where Jesus is called “the King”. Throughout the New Testament He bears the name “the Lord”, because Christians confess and own His lordship. In the Millennium, everyone will be subject to His reign over them in His everlasting kingdom. It's then that He'll be ‘the King’ to the restored nation of Israel.
2. Secondly, there's a dialogue between the King and the nations He judges. The question and answer discussions, if that's the correct phrase, between Him and the blessed nations are about how they facilitated, protected and dealt with the messengers of the Kingdom: *“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me”*, verses 37-40. The condemned nations ask identical questions, but in the negative sense “when did we not”. The answers to them are again identical, but also negative, “you did not”.
3. Thirdly, it's amazing that the Lord takes such detailed notice that these disciples were given their ordinary human rights and that none, even “the least of these” was missed out. Christ's kingdom will be righteous. In it, the needy will be satisfied, and everyone will be treated with respect and justice. These items are sadly missing from our present world, but there're many opportunities for believers today to show this kind of compassion: *“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward”*, 10:40-42.

The last verse of Matthew 25 summarizes the issues found in this cluster of parables: *“[the wicked] will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”*.

In the first two parables, the foolish virgins and the evil servants are identified as the wicked. They represent professing Christians of the Church period, whose lives are a contradiction of the name ‘Christian’. These parables teach that they don't have vital faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that, like the foolish virgins, they don't expect Christ to return to establish His kingdom. In the third parable, the wicked are the goats, those nations who mistreat God's people during the Great Tribulation. For all the wicked, the judgement is serious because it's so irreversible: *“Then He will also say to those... ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”*, verse 41.

In all three parables the righteous are clearly identified as those who have real faith in Christ. In the case of the righteous nations, it's those nations whose attitude to, and treatment of, believers in Jesus demonstrates their submission to the Lord. Believers of the present age are rewarded with rule in the coming kingdom of the Lord Jesus

Christ. But the joy of their Lord will be their everlasting reward! The saved nations enter the kingdom to enjoy all its blessedness, which is called eternal life in verse 46.

In closing, it's true to say that in every dispensation, the Lord knows them who are His. Are you a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you watching, waiting and working for His coming? Do you exhibit those true characteristics of compassion and concern for others, as the people of God should do? Are you awake or asleep? In other words, is your Christianity real? If it is, you'll enter into the blessings of the coming kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ!

*Jesus is coming! Sing the glad word!  
Coming for those He redeemed by His blood,  
Coming to reign as the glorified Lord!  
Jesus is coming again!*

*Jesus is coming! The promise is true;  
Who are the chosen, the faithful, the few,  
Waiting and watching prepared for review?  
Jesus is coming again!*

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