

Are You Ready?

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Preacher: Mr Iain Macritchie

[0 : 00] And although I'd like us to look at verses 1 to 13 of this chapter together, we can perhaps take verses 10 to 12 as our text.

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. Afterwards, the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered, Truly, I say to you, I do not know you. And throughout the Gospels, Jesus often spoke in parables.

These were earthly stories, stories that those who heard them could relate to, but yet they were stories that had a deeper meaning, a spiritual meaning.

The parable that we have before us here, the parable of the ten virgins, is no exception. This is a parable that follows on very much from the preceding chapter, the theme of time being short.

[1 : 26] And so for a short time this morning, I would like us to study this parable together, trying to make sense of what it is that Jesus is saying to us in these words.

No doubt this is a parable that many of you have heard oftentimes over the years. Yet it's so important for us to remind ourselves of these truths.

So what I'd like us to do is to look at this parable under three headings. I'd firstly like us to look at the context of the parable. What is it that's happening here?

Who are the characters that we read of in this parable? Then I'd like us to look at the crisis that occurs in this parable, the crisis that is so evident in the lives of some of the characters that we read about.

And then lastly, I'd like us to look at the cost, the cost that this crisis has on the lives of these women.

[2 : 30] Firstly, then, I'd like us to look at context. And looking around the church this morning, I can see many married couples.

Some perhaps are newly married. Some have perhaps been married for many, many years.

Perhaps there are those even who are engaged, who are looking forward to getting married.

And whatever the case, I think it's true to say that a wedding day is one of the most special days of your life.

This is a day of rejoicing, of celebration, a day of anticipation, of new beginnings, of spending the rest of your lives together. You know, that's where we find the context of this parable.

This parable is written in the context of people who are anticipating a wedding, people who are waiting for a wedding to happen.

[3 : 34] Now, bearing in mind, this is not a wedding as a wedding that we would know. This is, of course, a theoretical wedding. It's a parable, but nonetheless, it's based on what a wedding would have been like in first-century Palestine.

We don't know much about weddings at that time. Very little has been recorded. In fact, Jesus himself doesn't say anything about the actual ceremony here in this chapter.

Nonetheless, we do know one or two things from Jewish history. They will perhaps help us to shed light on what's happening here. We know firstly that a wedding at this time was preceded by a betrothal.

A betrothal was basically an engagement. But unlike our engagements, this was something that was taken perhaps a little bit more seriously.

In order for this betrothal, this engagement to be broken off, you would need to have a divorce. And so this was something that was, from the outset, quite binding.

[4 : 47] And at the end of this betrothal period, at the end of this engagement, the marriage would, like our own engagements, take place. But very specifically, this marriage would take place either on a Wednesday or on a Thursday, if you were a widow.

On that day, the bridegroom would make his way to the house of the bride and he would meet with the bridal party. And it wasn't until the bridegroom and the bridal party would come and meet together that the wedding itself would take place.

After the wedding ceremony, there would be a torch-lit procession. This procession would lead the bridegroom back to his house where they would be feasting.

That would go on for days and even weeks. And so in the parable that we have before us this morning, we read of ten girls who are waiting for this wedding to happen.

They are waiting for the bridegroom to come. We read in verse 1 that they went to meet the bridegroom. And scripture doesn't say the relationship that these girls had with the bridegroom.

[6 : 02] Perhaps they were servants of his or perhaps they were attending to the needs of the bride, like we would call bridesmaids nowadays.

Or perhaps they were even just friends or neighbors. Or scripture isn't clear about that. But either way, it doesn't really matter. Because what we do know is that the girls have all been invited to this wedding.

They've all been invited to take part in this torch-light procession which would escort the bridegroom to the reception. Now when we look at these ten girls at a first glance, it would seem that they're all very much the same.

They're similar. There's not much to separate them. They've all been invited to this banquet.

They're all waiting in anticipation for the bridegroom to come.

They even have a desire to see him. They all have lamps ready so that when the bridegroom comes, they can take part in the procession.

[7 : 10] They appeared to be the same. But yet when we look at verse 2, we see that this isn't the case.

In fact, these girls, although they may have appeared to have been quite similar in their motivations for being at that wedding or waiting for that wedding to happen, we read that five of them were in fact wise and five were foolish.

Now the lamps that they had, they would have been pretty basic. The lamp would have been a stick with a rag on the end of it. And this rag would have been soaked in oil and lit in order to be used as a torch.

And so they would have had to have had extra oil with them to make sure that the lamp would keep burning. That's why we read that five of the girls took flasks of oil with them.

They were prepared. They were wise. Now if you or I, if we're invited to a wedding, we don't wait until we're sitting in the church waiting for the bride to come down the aisle before we suddenly think to ourselves, I wonder what gift I will buy.

[8 : 31] It would be too late then. Or we wouldn't be sitting in the church in our jeans and our t-shirt thinking, I wonder what I'll wear. Again, it would be too late.

The wedding's about to start. And so in the same way that we, in the same way we see here a torch that has no oil, we see how short-sighted it is on the part of the foolish virgins to come and to expect to be part of this wedding, but not to be prepared.

And so that's why scripture quite simply describes them as being foolish. Now it's at this point that we need to look at this story in the way that Christ intended us to look at this story, to look at it through spiritual glasses in order to be able to see the deeper meaning of what it is that's going on here.

Notice that unlike our culture, the focus is on the bridegroom. Any wedding that we've been at, the focus is always on the bride.

All eyes are on the bride. But the fact is, we don't even hear the bride mentioned here. The focus is on the bridegroom.

[9 : 53] And the simple reason for that is that the bridegroom here is representing Christ himself. The ten virgins that we read off here, the ten girls, they're representing two different groups that make up the visible church, the church that we have before us today.

The wise and the foolish. Yes, we are all sitting in this church together. And it's lovely to have so many people gathered together with a desire to worship God.

But yet as I look out before me, there is a divide. There are those who are wise. There are those who are foolish.

There are those who are the wheat. There are those who are the tares. Those who are the sheep and those who are the goats. Thankfully, it is not my job to decide who that is.

But the fact is that you all appear to have a desire to find out more about the bridegroom for yourselves.

[11:05] You have accepted the invitation to come to the table of the gospel. And you appear to be listening with an ear, with the torch of the word of the Lord in front of you in anticipation.

But there is a divide. And I wonder as you sit here this morning, friends, which category do you sit under? Are you wise?

Or are you foolish? But as we dig a little deeper, we see that the details of the context here, they quite quickly lead us. And this is our second point.

They quite quickly lead us to a crisis point. Because here are the ten virgins. They've been waiting for a long time for the bridegroom to come.

In fact, we read in verse 5 that they'd waited and waited and waited. And because the bridegroom had delayed, because there was no sign of him, they became drowsy and they fell asleep.

[12:14] And some commentators would say that we mustn't read too much into the fact that they fell asleep. And yes, that is not the main point of this parable.

Absolutely not. But it's interesting to notice that in chapter 24, verse 42, which is very much linked with this parable, we read the words, Stay awake, for you do not know the day our Lord is coming. While in verse 13, at the end of this parable, we read of Christ saying, Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

And so surely it's impossible for us to watch, to stay awake, if we are in fact asleep. And what's interesting to notice here is that both the wise and the foolish virgins, they both fell into a slumber together.

Yes, we may be wise unto salvation today, but we must be careful that we do not allow ourselves to fall into that spiritual slumber.

[13:27] We read so clearly in different parts of Scripture that we are to watch. Mark 14 says that we are to watch and to pray so that we do not fall into temptation.

Perhaps the wise virgins would have been better served by making sure that all the preparations for the wedding were in place. Making sure that indeed there was enough oil for everyone.

It wasn't, of course, their responsibility. But surely when they noticed that the other girls didn't have oil, they should perhaps have pointed them in the right direction.

What a lesson to us as the Lord's people. That we don't go into that slumber where we're not really aware of the lost state of all those that are around us.

This takes us on to the main point of our parable in verse 6 where we see the ten girls awoken from their sleep.

[14:30] Here is the bridegroom. Come and meet him. They hear that cry. Now you can just imagine how they felt. They were asleep. They were awoken and startled by these words.

There would have been a sheer panic as they tried to get themselves together, to get everything in order for the bridegroom who was on his way. And as they all arose, they trimmed their lamps.

They lit their lamps. And just for a moment, all appeared to be well. You see, a rag that was not completely dry, when it was lit, it would have stayed lit for perhaps a couple of seconds.

But very quickly, it would have faded. It would have smoldered. It would have gone out. And so it would have been with the torches of the foolish virgins. Their lamps would very quickly have gone out.

And because of this, they wouldn't have been able to take part in the procession. There was absolutely no place for them. There was no place for them in such a special event.

[15:40] They didn't have any light to bring to the parade. Friends, you know, it's the same when the Lord will come for our never-dying souls, whether that will be through death, or when he comes on the last day, if we are here, to see that one way or another, he's going to come.

He's going to come suddenly. And if we don't have that oil in our lamps, we will find ourselves in the same way. We will find ourselves panicking, trying to make last-minute provision for our soul.

You know, on that day, there will be those who, in their panic, they will say, well, I did this in your name, and I did that in your name. But as we read in Matthew 7, the Lord will say, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Why? Because they didn't have that oil in their lamps. Because they didn't know Christ personally for themselves. Because they had a form of godliness. But yet, they denied its power.

[17:05] Outward religion will never save anyone. You see, what we need is, we need to have that root of the matter in our souls.

We must, we absolutely must, be born again. We need to have the oil of the spirit of the Lord penetrating through our very being.

Friends, do you have that oil this morning? Are you suitably prepared so that you too can join in the procession when the bridegroom comes?

Or is it so that your torch is, it's still running off the fumes of this world? The fumes that quickly extinguish the spirit?

The fumes that are choking the spirit and leaving your torch in complete darkness? You know, there's also something quite stark here, I think, and solemn to all those of us who profess to be the Lords.

[18:17] As I said earlier in the run-up to the wedding, I'm sure there was no real way that they could tell who was wise and who was foolish.

It wasn't until the bridegroom came that all became clear, if you like. It wasn't until then that the lack of the foolish was made known.

You know, friends, it's not a profession of faith by sitting at the Lord's table. It's not that that shows that we have been saved.

In many ways, that is the easy bit. It is, of course, difficult for us to take that step. But in the grand, the bigger picture, that in many ways is the easy bit.

The fact is, we read in the chapter before that the Lord says that it is those who endure until the end who will be saved.

[19:19] You see, there is an enduring that is involved in the Christian walk. There is that keeping on, keeping on that is called for in the Christian life.

It's all very well, coming and sitting at the Lord's table and professing our faith. But then if we go through lives with our torches unlit, hiding our lamp under our lampstand, as it were, if we go through life, hiding the fact that we are Christians, can we truly say that we are His?

Friends, Christianity is never to be an add-on to our lives. It is never to be a hobby or a pastime that we just go to on a Wednesday or on a Lord's Day.

And so, friends, let us always, and I say this to myself, let us always, daily, make our calling and our election sure, that we would examine whether or not we are in the faith, whether we have that oil in our lamp.

And so these five girls, they find themselves in a crisis. They are totally unprepared. And at this point, you might feel sorry for them.

[20:40] You might think, well, they didn't realize. It was just an oversight on their part. But think about it. This was such a big event.

They would have been working towards this for quite some time. So there's absolutely no way that they didn't know the ins and outs of this procession. But yet, for one reason or another, they'd put off their duties for another day.

They thought that perhaps they could just get the oil closer to the time. They could draw and get that oil when the bridegroom would come. And doesn't this sound familiar to us this morning?

You may be here and you might be thinking, yes, I would like to be a Christian if the truth be told. But not today. Not quite now. Not until I've lived my life to the full.

Not until I've tasted all that this world can give me. Give it a few years. Let me live and let live.

Friends, will you be here in another few years?

[21:59] There are absolutely no guarantees as we're reminded day by day, even in our own community. And even if you are here, how do you know that your heart will not have hardened?

Because the gospel has two effects. It doesn't leave you unchanged. When you hear the gospel, your heart is either softened or hardened. And if you're sitting under it week after week after week and you're yet to come and to taste and see that God is good, it may well be so that your heart is getting even harder.

We read in verse 8 that in desperation the foolish girl said to the wise, give us some of your oil for our lamps are going out.

They're absolutely desperate by this point. They're asking their friends to help them. They don't have oil for themselves so they're going to ask the other girls if they can share some of their oil with them.

But this is never going to work because the girls need every drop of oil for themselves for that procession. They were going to be walking a long way slowly and so they would need all the oil for themselves.

[23 : 27] They couldn't share it. And so it'll be on the last day or on your dying days if you're yet without Christ and you come to that realization you cannot turn to your husband or your wife or your children or even your mother or father and say to them can I please have some of your grace?

I need grace. I'm dying. Can I have some of yours? Friends, that won't do. You need your own. You can't stand before the judgment seat of Christ depending even on the prayers of grandparents, godly grandparents that you knew had been praying for you.

Friends, you need your own prayers. You need your own oil. I wonder if you know anything of that this morning. If you know anything of the grace of the Lord in your life.

Well, if you don't, the solemn reality is that there will be a great cost to you as there was for these foolish virgins and that brings us to the final point, the cost.

We read that at the very last minute in verse 5 that the virgins, the girls, they went out to try and buy oil for themselves.

[24 : 56] They were desperate. Of course, all those who would be selling oil would have been in their beds. They would have been asleep. And so the virgins return, hoping to somehow get into this wedding feast only to find that the door has been shut.

Five were inside and five were outside and the five who were outside it was too late for them.

They knew it was too late, but yet they began banging on that door. Lord, Lord, Lord, open to us. they had made no provision while there was time.

They somehow thought that all would be well in the end and that they would somehow be accepted into that marriage feast. And so it is with us all too often in life.

We can, I think I've said this before, we can just bury our heads in the sand, hoping that all will be well in the end. Friends, can you not see the solemn reality of the fact that one day you will be faced without meeting with the bridegroom?

[26 : 20] I wonder what side of the door you will be on. And you know, it's true to say that the Jews themselves, they were not prepared when Christ came into the world.

Yes, they were practicing religion. They were coming to church just like you are here. they were doing all the right things. Yet they totally missed the point.

Because when the Messiah came, he wasn't what they had hoped he would be. He wasn't the king that they had been looking for.

And because he didn't meet up to their superficial expectations, they refused to allow this man to rule over them.

Perhaps that's you this morning. You're in the same boat. Yes, you come to church. Yes, you pay the church. You take this box and that box and all these things are truly to be commended.

[27 : 25] Please don't get me wrong. You carry on coming because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. God, but yet although we do all these things, is it so that we, if the truth be told, we cannot stomach the thought of Christ sitting on the throne of our heart?

We cannot really think about Christ ruling our lives. And instead we follow him, but we follow him afar.

We follow him on our own terms, with no real oil in our lamp. And so these words and the door was shut.

They were accursed to the foolish virgins. And does this not remind us of those in the day of Noah? They too had been given ample opportunity to come to that place of safety.

Noah had been preaching to them year in, year out, about the coming flood. But yet they laughed, they mocked, and they scorned.

[28 : 38] It was until it was too late. The floods came, and those who had put their trust in that word, they were safe.

The rest, of course, they were found on the outside, no doubt banging on the door, asking to get in. But for them, it was too late. The door was firmly shut.

The day of opportunity was over. But you know, although the door was to the foolish virgins a curse, there is no doubt that it was a blessing to the wise.

we read that those who were ready, they went in with him to the marriage feast. As I said at the beginning of the sermon, wedding days are amongst the happiest days that are, but yet they do not compare to that happiest day of all, that day of greatest joy when the Lord will bring his people in with him to that marriage supper of the Lamb.

And you know, that's what heaven is. It is a perpetual gathering together of all that is joyful and good with the bridegroom himself, with Christ at the centre.

[30 : 13] And you know, even now at this very moment, those who have been wise in this world, those who ensured that they had oil in their lamps, they find themselves, even at this very moment, those who had fought the good fight, those who have been in that spiritual battle, those who were valiant soldiers for the Lord, they know what it is to take their place at that marriage supper, because for them the storm has changed into a calm at his command and will, their waves that raged before, the waves of life, the storms of life, they are now quiet and still.

For them the door is shut at last, the door is shut on all pain, the door is shut on all sorrow, on all doubts, on all temptations, what a prospect awaits the Lord's people.

Thousands have sat in these pews over the years, just like you are this morning. Many have had the blessing of coming to know the Lord for themselves, but the solemn reality is, and I don't say this lightly, there are those who have sat in these very pews who have put off making sure that they had oil until a more convenient time, but yet that more convenient time, it never came.

Friends, one day that door will be shut if you are not prepared. It won't be a jar so that you can somehow squeeze in. It will be firmly shut, and there will be a separation, a clear separation between the wise and the foolish.

We read in verse 5 that the bridegroom was delayed, and with this I'm nearly finished. The foolish virgins, they had plenty of time, and so too have you had plenty of time.

[32 : 37] You've had months, years, even decades hearing the same old story. But the fact is, time is running out.

But although time is running out, I leave you with good news, because that's what the gospel is. And the good news is that the door of gospel opportunity is still wide open to you here this morning. It might not be tomorrow, who knows? won't you make sure that you have oil in your lamp? Won't you make sure that you have the spirit of the Lord dwelling in your soul, so that when he comes, and he will come, that when he comes, you will be ready.

You will be ready to go with him, to accompany him into that glorious heavenly feast for all eternity. Amen. And we pray the Lord would bless these few thoughts to us.