

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The idea of the separation which will be made at the last judgment was introduced in chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel as part of the teaching of Jesus, and that distinction dominates the rest of the discourse which dominates this part of his account. Here, the bridesmaids await the bridegroom so that they can go with him to the bride's house and then on to his house where the ceremony is supposed to take place. Five are ready when he comes, but five are not, so that they miss the feast. The point of the parable in this context would appear to be to advise the disciples to be prepared and ready when the Lord comes so that they can then enter the kingdom. The story should not be read to mean that the kingdom is *like* the bridesmaids but, rather, that "*the situation* at the last judgment will be like *the situation* in which these maidens found themselves."

Today, people don't ordinarily get married at night, but in the Middle East in the first century "torchlight processions...late in the evening" were not unknown. The story itself is "rooted in the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and folly – that is, being sensible or being silly." In the Book of Proverbs, for example, Wisdom and Folly are treated as two women calling out to men going by "and offering them their respective lifestyles" and value sets. In the case of Matthew's parable, wisdom means "being ready with the oil for the lamp, and folly means not thinking about it until it's too late." Also, in this parable, the oil itself does not stand for a generalized idea such as good works, faith, or love but rather "simply means being ready for the key moment." And the overall point is "being prepared, being wise; thinking ahead, realizing that a crisis is coming sooner or later and that if you don't make preparations now, and keep them in good shape in the meantime, you'll wish you had."

One other part of the narrative has its roots "deep in the Jewish context" and suggest that Jesus is intended to function as the bridegroom.

This "hints again at Jesus' messiahship." Thus, the parable is not simply about the very end of time but rather about "Jesus coming as the Messiah to his people Israel." They were the ones invited to the wedding feast in the parable. They are "divided into the wise who know Jesus and make sure they keep alert for his coming," and the foolish to whom in the end Jesus will say "I don't know you." It is in this new era in which God has acted decisively to enter into a new covenant with his people that "we need as much as ever the warning that it's easy to go slack on the job, to stop paying attention to God's work and its demands, to be unprepared when the moment suddenly arrives."

This story of *The Ten Virgins* is "an excellent example of Jesus' accomplished skill as a teller of parables." Although there is debate about the nature of the eschatology of Jesus (his view of end times), this parable offers "possible evidence" of his *actual* eschatology rather than a later interpretation of that view. If so,

this element makes the story worthy of our attention. It is likely that the parable is, in fact, addressed to the disciples since they would have had an educated and personal interest in determining “the interval between his death and final vindication” because it would affect them so directly. In Matthew’s gospel, any delay in the arrival of the *Parousia* (or second coming) was not a primary concern. Thus, *The Ten Virgins* is primarily about readiness, not delay. All the same, the parable provides evidence that Jesus expected an interval prior to his final vindication.

The verb for “to watch” in Greek literally means to stay awake, it is used here metaphorically to mean “be alert.” Watching is not a passive activity, however. It suggests readiness, and faithful fulfilment of one’s calling to follow Jesus. Additionally, wisdom is needed in view of the eschaton itself. In the case of the parable told by Jesus here, wisdom means “understanding the eschatological outlook of Jesus’ teaching and then living in a way that fits with the expectation of vindication and the full coming of God’s kingdom.” Additionally, wisdom and readiness are virtual synonyms in this parable.

While the previous parable told by Jesus warned that the second coming might come *sooner* than expected, this one assumes that it may come *later* than expected. The time, of course, is not known, but “the certainty and import of the coming are taken for granted.”

It is worth recalling that “at the heart of the Christian faith is the expectation that one day God will set things right --- that the kingdom will come and that Jesus will (indeed) be vindicated and his dream put into effect.” Readiness is “an attitude, a commitment, and a (way of life). It means living in ways that comport with the character of the kingdom and being faithful at all times.” Since this parable is not about any delay in the arrival of the second coming, it can only mean that we “cannot and should not live in...excitement and anxiety.” What is at issue are “the determining factors (of) the character of God and our response to it.” Evil and injustice will continue to plague mankind, but our faith teaches that they do not get the last word.” In this sense, “the delay of the *Parousia* is filled with the mission of the church.”

The teachings about *wisdom* and *readiness* are rooted in the Old Testament. Here are the words of The Wisdom of Solomon on those topics:

**Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.
One who *rises early* to seek her will have no difficulty,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.
To fix one’s thought on her is perfect understanding,
and one who is *vigilant* on her account will soon be free from care,**

because she goes about seeking those worthy of her,
and she graciously appears to them in their paths,
and meets them in every thought.

(Wisdom 6:12–16)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Sources

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