The Ten Bridesmaids

Matthew 25:1-13

1 “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. 3 Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, 4 but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. 5 But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. 6 ‘And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ 7 Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ 10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. 11 “Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ 12 But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’

13 “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming” (NKJV).

Setting

This parable only appears in Matthew in a discourse about the end of the world. This also appears between two other parables on the same subject: the Parables of the Faithful and Wise Servant and the Talents.

Jewish traditions and marriage customs from that time need to be understood in order to have a full view of this parable. There are two main parts of the marriage ceremony. First is the kiddushin, the process of the parents creating the marriage contract. The contract meant that the couple was engaged and that the engagement could only be broken by divorce. The bride would have been about twelve-to thirteen-years old while the groom was about eighteen. The second part of the marriage ceremony takes place a year after the engagement and is known as the nissu’in, or the marriage feast. It is during this second phase that the events of this parable take place. Scholars believe this because this feast usually begins with a procession. The scene we see in the parable is of the groom making a procession to the wedding: “Since the wedding festivities typically took place at the home of the bridegroom’s parents, the groom is apparently expected to arrive...
at his parents’ home where others (including the bride) are waiting, as are the bridesmaids themselves” (Hultgren 171).

For the early church this parable held many allegorical elements, which are still recognized today. The groom represents the approaching Jesus and the bridesmaids are the people of the Christian community. The foolish bridesmaids being locked out is an allegory for judgment, a continuing theme throughout Matthew.

Exegetical Analysis

The authenticity of this parable has been questioned because of the allegorical elements. However, these elements are part of Jewish tradition and did not necessarily come from the early Christian community. God being Israel’s husband is a common metaphor throughout Jewish tradition as is a feast symbolizing the kingdom of God. It is quite possible that Jesus drew from the symbolism he knew from Jewish tradition to create this parable.

A question some scholars have raised is whether the bridesmaids went out once or twice to meet the groom. In 25:1 it says that they “took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom” and then in 25:6 the “women are summoned to come out to meet the groom as he approaches” (Hultgren 173). The likelihood is that 25:1 is letting the listener know what is going to happen. It summarizes what the women are there to do.

The main difference between these two groups of women is that half of them brought extra oil and the rest did not. Like other parables, such as the Wise and Foolish Builders, there is a separation of the wise and the foolish. The wise women brought along extra oil for their lamps in containers. The five who were foolish were forced to go get

Comment [SM3]: Caution should be offered that not everything has an obvious allegorical counterpart. The wait may be the delay of the parousia. But, what is the oil? The lamp / torch? The refusal to share? The merchants? Etc.

Comment [SM4]: Many examples could be cited of narratives that offer a summary anticipating the entire story as an introduction. See Mt 1:18 as an example.

Comment [SM5]: The basis for the distinction between the two groups is the difference in their preparation for a long wait. Nothing else is said of their character, past religious experience, etc.
more oil, but by the time they had, the doors were closed and they could not enter into the party.

**Message**

In 25:13 Jesus ends the parable by saying, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” The verb used here may not mean exactly to keep watch because in the story all of the women, even the wise, fell asleep. A more appropriate word might be **vigilant**. The main meaning is to be ready. The wise women were ready because they brought extra oil. They were prepared for whatever might happen. The foolish women were not prepared for the groom arriving late. No one knows when Jesus will come back so He says to be ready for any hour.

**Application**

The disciples had an easy time anticipating the return of Jesus. They had known him during his life here on earth, and He had promised to return soon. **Today, it is hard to imagine the return of Jesus.** His return seems distant and remote, maybe even abstract. It is too easy to go along with our everyday life and not think about the future. This parable challenges the reader to not just be prepared, but to be vigilant, to have everything together in case of Jesus’ return. **Those who are ready will be allowed to join the celebration and the feast in the kingdom of God, while those who are not prepared will be shut out.**

**Bibliography**


You saw my reservations about your omissions in your treatment. It’s not that it’s too short, but it takes too much for granted at points.

Grade: B+