

Watching Unto Christ's Coming

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[1] Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. [2] And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. [3] They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: [4] But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. [5] While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. [6] And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. [7] Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. [8] And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. [9] But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. [10] And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. [11] Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. [12] But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. [13] Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.
Matthew 25:1-13

This parable forms a part of the Lord's discourse on the signs of His coming which is recorded for us in Matthew 24. Jesus discusses these signs from the very practical viewpoint of urging upon the disciples and the church the calling to watch. In this connection Jesus closes this discussion with the parable of the ten virgins. He was about to go by way of His cross and resurrection to glory. In heaven Christ would work all things so that He can come again to take His church unto Himself. And so Jesus addressed Himself to the needs of His church whom He loves. While the Lord is in glory the church will have to remain in the world. There they are called to live as virgins who await the coming of their husbands. The Lord knows that it will seem to them sometimes as if He tarries. The danger is that, should they begin to think that He tarries, they will fall asleep. The night of sin grows darker and the hours slip rapidly away, and still the Lord does not return. For this reason the Lord admonishes the church to watch for His coming.

The figure of the parable is taken from the customs of Jesus' time observed in connection with wedding festivities. In general at the time of a wedding the man who was betrothed to a girl would, on the morning of the wedding day, retreat with his friends to a scheduled spot where they could celebrate the coming event. During this same day the bride would go to the house of her husband-to-be and make herself ready for the evening ceremony and celebration. As the day began to die, around suppertime, the groom would return with his companions in a procession of singing and dancing men carrying flaming torches. As this procession neared the house where the bride waited, the cry would go up from those who were watching: "Behold, the bridegroom cometh." That cry would be the signal for the bride to make last-minute preparations and proceed in the company of her bridesmaids to meet the bridegroom. When the two groups met they would return together with rejoicing for the ceremony and festivities. These customs are adapted in the parable through a great spiritual truth.

The virgins of the parable picture the church visible which is here on earth at any given time. But at the same time the church is referred to as virgins because those who are members of the church are betrothed to Christ. In those days an engagement was not a loose and relatively meaningless bond as it is today. Two engaged people could only break engagement by means of legal divorce. And this adequately expresses the relation between Christ and His church. Christ and His church are engaged and thus principally married. But while the church remains in the world she is called a virgin for her lover is far away from her and she, while she waits, keeps herself unspotted from the world. Presently, when her lover comes again, the marriage will finally be consummated.

But five of the virgins are wise and five are foolish. Wisdom and foolishness are not relative concepts in the sense that they depict an earthly virtue of lack of it. Wisdom is a heavenly gift of grace which is wrought in the hearts of God's people through the Spirit of Christ, while foolishness is sin and comes from the depraved heart of man. There is always a practical aspect to wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to adapt one's life to the realities of the world. The true reality of things is the Scriptural truth that this world will not last forever, but that the day is coming when it will be destroyed. Wisdom is the application of this truth of the Word of God to the specific walk and calling of a man here in this present time. A man who is wise therefore, prepares for what he knows is coming in the future; i.e., wisdom means that one lives all his life in the consciousness of Christ's return. Foolishness is just the opposite. A

foolish man also knows the truth. He knows that Christ is coming again. He knows also that he ought to pay attention to this truth and that he ought to live a life in conformity with it. But he pays no attention. He lives as if Christ will never come and as if this world will go on forever. Foolishness is always principally rooted in unbelief.

The wise virgins took oil in their lamps while the foolish virgins did not. In general it seems as if the oil in the parable is simply a picture of preparedness. Those with oil were prepared for Christ's coming, while those without oil were not. This preparedness is basically the watchfulness of the church as she is called to live in daily anticipation of Christ's return. Five of the virgins were only virgins outwardly. They represent those who belong to the church only in an outward sense. They claim to carry with them the Word of God and they leave the impression that they confess that Word. They even speak of the hope of Christ's coming. But they really pay no attention to that Word and live as if Christ will never come. But preparedness is especially expressed in the Christian's hope. The child of God hopes with longing and expectation for the coming of the bridegroom. And this longing is expressed in the prayer for Christ's coming. But this hope becomes in fact, a whole way of life according to which the believer walks as one who has no abiding home in this world but seeks the city which has foundations.

The main point of the parable is the admonition to watch for the Lord to come. This admonition is urgent because the bridegroom tarrys. This is dramatically pictured in the parable. Usually the bridegroom would come around suppertime since this was the time when the festivities were to begin. But six o'clock came and went and the groom did not appear. The hours slipped away and the night drew darker. The houses across the street became dark for the people had gone to bed; work ceased and play halted; the streets were quiet and empty; and still the bridegroom did not come. It was not until the very hallow of the night when all hope of his coming was abandoned that the groom is seen coming in the distance.

Now this is also a reality of life. From God's point of view it is true that Christ never tarrys. He comes at the moment fixed by God's eternal counsel. He cannot come before that moment for then all things would not be ready. And He always comes quickly. He does not linger but comes to take His people as quickly as possible. But the parable looks at the coming of Christ from our point of view. From our point of view the Lord seems to tarry. The church has always lived in the consciousness of Christ's return. This was true of the early church; it was true at the time of the Reformation when the church endured the persecution of Rome; and now again many people of God believe that it cannot be very long before the Lord returns.

While it is proper that the people of God live in this anticipation, the point is that the Lord tarrys. Almost two thousand years have elapsed since His ascension. Who would ever have thought it would take that long? The hours and days and years passed by with alarming rapidity. The night of sin grows darker. And yet Christ tarrys. Almost inevitably the thoughts begin to steal into our souls; will the Lord ever return? Will He ever come back? It is perhaps true that the world will go on forever? Was it all silliness on our part to expect Him to return? Is the Lord slack concerning his promise?

These questions could conceivably prompt the people of God to go to sleep. So it happened with the virgins. As the night grew darker and a hush settled over the city, as the shouting and the laughter were silenced by the deepening shadows of the night, all the virgins began to feel sleepy. Some of them began to nod a bit. Perhaps they fought off sleep and dozed only intermittently. Others dropped off to sleep completely, unable to stay awake. But this expresses a very real spiritual truth. The Lord means to say that the whole church will be overcome with lethargy and sleepiness. This will be true even of the people of God. A spiritual lethargy steals over the church and the members become indifferent to Christ's coming. They are, so to speak, drugged with pleasure and are lethargic because of the carnal pursuit of earthly happiness.

What a true picture of the church of our day this presents. We do well to examine ourselves. There are many who profess to hold the Word of God. But in their life and conduct they live as if that day will never come. Even the faithful virgins were drowsy and nodding.

Before the Lord returns there is the announcement of His coming. The parable refers to this when it speaks of the cry made at midnight. This must be distinguished from the coming itself. The cry is intended to arouse those who are waiting to make final preparations for His return. The church has need of this. And this must be associated with

the sign which Christ sends announcing His return. Although these signs are always present in the New Dispensation, they become more sharp as the end nears. They shake the church of Christ awake so that she is aroused to fulfill her calling and to look for Christ. In times such as these, when the signs are not too evident, the church becomes sleepy. But when horrible persecutions come and Antichrist rules in the world, then the church looks for the coming of the bridegroom.

No one knows the hour of Christ's coming. The Lord Himself makes the point that we cannot tell the time of His return for it is hidden in the counsel of God. He comes only when from every human point of view it seems as if Christ cannot come and will not come. The night must be at its darkest. This was true already in the Old Dispensation. For centuries the church looked for the coming of the promise. And only when all hope of His return was past, then and then only did Christ come. So it will be at the end.

So the admonition is to watch. Hope must be the main principle of our life. We must live as pilgrims and strangers in the earth because we have here no abiding city and our eternal destination is the house of our Father. We must pray constantly: "Come Lord Jesus, yea, come quickly." The church must lift up her petitions to the throne of grace for the return of her Savior. And in this way she must watch.

Those who make a show of wanting the return of Christ but do not live in watchfulness have no place at the wedding. They attempt to make their hypocrisy plausible to the very end. You can almost hear them: "Have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name done many mighty works?" But the fact is that they do not watch for they did not really in their hearts want the return of Christ. Now the bridegroom is here and they have no oil. They cannot borrow from others and they cannot buy in the stores for the hour is midnight. They have made the world their home. They have been drunk in the pleasures of the age. Fundamentally they hated Christ and His return and were satisfied with the world of sin. But even this is the purpose of Christ. Christ places election on the foreground. He says to them: "I never knew you. You were never My own. I never made you My betrothed. I never loved you. I never died for you."

For the certainty of the blessedness of the people of God is strongly emphasized. Christ comes at the stroke of God's clock, God's midnight. Then the elect will be saved. The empires of the wicked will crumble into disarray and the world of sin will be destroyed. The certainty of Christ's coming is based on the counsel of God itself. And rooted in that counsel is the victory of the cross and the resurrection. If Christ does not come again, then He never died to defeat the enemy and never rose triumphant over his foes. But he will come. And the certainty of his coming is the certainty of our blessedness. Watch therefore. It may be that the night is growing darker. The world of sin increases in iniquity. The Lord seems to delay. But watch. Watch and hope. Watch unto the end. The victory is surely ours.