

this text, let God reveal to you something of His will, and His plan for you within all eternity.

- *Reflect on the value of the life you have, in the light of the fact that it will cease one day. By God's grace, you may find that the harsh message of this text may help you value your life more fully.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, make me ready. Ready to do Your will, ready to live for others, ready to love my neighbour, ready to work for You, ready to witness to Your Name. Make me ready to follow You, the Bridegroom; my Master and Lord. AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, bring the Kingdom of Your Heaven to our earthly lives. Make us pure in heart and merciful; make us peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; make us meek and poor in spirit, and worthy to receive Your blessings. We ask this knowing that we face all kinds of persecution, but far more, longing for Your presence bringing liberation to our souls. We give You all our praise, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Seasons

Pray for the life of our planet. Pray in earnest about environmental issues and the problems of 'greenhouse gasses' which are changing the seasons in some countries.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for people in Tibet and the political problems there*
- *Pray for those suffering from the cholera epidemic in Africa*
- *Give thanks for the joys of preparing for a coming feast!*

Meditation

Have you waited for a long time?
Waited for something to come in the post,
Waited for an important event to take place,
Waited for someone you love to arrive?

It is only ever 'not worth the wait'
If what is expected never comes, or disappoints,
Making a fool of us either personally or publicly
It's so embarrassing if hope on that which fails ...

And people scoff at us for waiting for our Lord.
As for them, there's no more waiting; God is dead.
But for us who see the emerging eternal signs,
We hope with ever growing certainty in our faith ...

The faith that Christ implanted deep within us
Is mixed with faith and love; always waiting,
For faith in God will never stop until Christ comes.
And all faith's waiting will, one day, be found.

Bible Study - Matthew 25:1-13

¹ *'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young girls took their lamps and went off to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise ones took flasks of oil together with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep.*

⁶ *'At midnight there was a shout, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." ⁷ Then all the young girls got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, our lamps are going out!" ⁹*

But the wise replied, "No! there won't be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the shops and buy some for yourselves."

¹⁰ *'Then while they went to buy the oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ The other young girls came later, and said, "Lord, lord, open up for us!" ¹² But he replied, "Amen I say to you, I do not know you."*

¹³ *'Therefore keep awake, for you do not know either the day or the hour.'*

Review

The parable of the 'wise and foolish young girls' only occurs in Matthew's Gospel, where it is included in Jesus' final sequence of teaching (24:45 – 25:46) before the events of His last few days in Jerusalem. All the remaining parables speak about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven and its Lord, like the earlier parables, but not about the issue of 'when'.

The parable of the wise and foolish girls picks up on many themes Jesus referred to in His earlier teaching, and describes how a disciple must live in a state of readiness for Jesus to come again. It describes the 'crisis' of the End Times when our salvation and that of all creation will be at stake before God, and as it unfolds, the story reveals three sections; before the feast (25:1-5), the coming of the bridegroom (25:6-9) and the consequences (25:10-12). Jesus only mentioned a few details of a Jewish wedding because what happened was common knowledge for His hearers. Matthew seems to have trimmed everything to the bare minimum so that the theme of urgency comes across clearly.

Before the feast (vv1-5) Ten girls attend the wedding, but their role is not clear. They were young girls (the Greek word is 'virgins') part of a wider group of guests, and their duties were to do with the bridegroom, not the bride. During a wedding, the bridegroom would have left his house with his family to go to his bride's house, arrange the 'bride-price', and then return to his own house with his wife, surrounded on his return by all the families. The ten girls were probably preparing to attend the bridegroom on his way.

The group of ten, however, was identified by Jesus as consisting of five wise and five foolish girls (25:2). What are we to make of this? In the past, some thought of the wise girls as representing Christians and the foolish as Jews, but this doesn't fit real history or the Gospel, as the Jews have nothing to do with the church long before the End Times. Alternatively, rabbinic tradition was that 'ten forms a congregation', so we could think of the group as representing the Church awaiting the Lord's return, and the division between wise and foolish was one that Jesus used many times when talking about how people responded to Him (e.g. the parable about the wise and foolish men who built houses 7:24-27, and the wise and the foolish slave (24:45-51).

The difference between the wise and the foolish girls was their readiness for a long night's wait, and in order to have light for the night, an additional flask of oil was required to 'top up' the lamps as they burnt to give light. Clearly, the wise girls had their additional flasks of oil and the foolish girls did not (25:3,4), but they all fell asleep whilst awaiting the bridegroom, because the bridegroom 'delayed' (25:5). The message at this point is simple, be ready and be prepared to wait, however long it takes!

The Coming (25:6-9) In this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom, and though this seems strange, Jesus had used this imagery before, as in Matthew 9:14f. where He defended His disciples by saying 'the wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them'; meaning Himself. In saying this, Jesus took on Himself the imagery of the Old Testament which talked of God as a bridegroom (Is 54:1-8, Jer 31:32; Hos 2:1-20)!

The whole point of the story is that the bridegroom was delayed before he finally came, and we are not told why. However, we can conclude from the previous chapter (24:36-51) that God would delay Jesus' return according to His plan. Now, when the cry goes up 'Here is the bridegroom!' (25:6), a crisis is generated; and the difference between the preparations of the two groups of girls is exposed (25:9)! The separation of the groups of girls reminds us of the wheat and the tares in one of Jesus' former parables (13:36-43), and the division of the Church in the parable of the dragnet (13:47-50) and the general scriptural theme of separation by judgement in scripture. In each case the results are absolute; a day will come when there is no more time to prepare. This is the central message of the parable, and if it does not motivate preparation for the Lord's coming, I am not sure what will!

The Consequences (25:10-12) The five young girls who are ready follow the bridegroom into the wedding feast (25:10), and the whole story floods with further imagery from scripture. The Parousia is frequently described in scriptures as a feast (Psalm 23, Mark 2:19-20, John 3:29-30, Matt. 22:1-14). The late arrival of the girls, calling 'Lord, Lord ...' reminds us of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount 'not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven (7:21ff); they did not do the will of the Father because they were not prepared.

The tragic rejection of the five girls naturally sounds harsh to us. In our own lives, it is not appropriate for us to reject people 'because they are not ready'. But the point of the story is that our lives and our 'times' will indeed come to an end, and the very meaning of 'end' is that it is final; there is no more time left. Jesus consistently taught His disciples to be ready for His coming and live accordingly, because when the end comes, it will be too late for any further change. The words of verse 12 which constitute God's final rejection of those who are not ready are a little obscure, but comes from an Aramaic expression meaning 'I have nothing more to do with you.' None of us wishes to hear that from the lips of Jesus.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which part of the parable of the wise and foolish girls do you think is most significant, and why?
2. Look up some of the connections to other passages of scripture mentioned in the study to further your understanding of the text.
3. Do you feel it is fair of God to 'close the door' at the final feast? Discuss what God does before that closure to help people to respond to the Gospel.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The simple question is this. If the Lord were to come now, would you think He would be pleased to find you living your life as you do, and doing what you do? If there are things that are part of your life that do not match this criteria, is it worth considering whether they represent some 'un-preparedness' on your part which needs to be dealt with? We all face mini-crises during this life which make us deal with such issues from time to time, but the time will come when God's final Crisis will catch us out, if we are not ready and waiting. This is a basic call to discipleship, and although we naturally find the message hard, it is surely a reality of our world that we must face.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Continue to spend time reflecting on this most difficult of Jesus' teachings. Scripture often says far more than we immediately perceive, so as you dwell on*