

ARE YOU A WISE VIRGIN . . . OR A FOOLISH ONE?

A study for those waiting for Jesus, Part 1 of 3
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Introduction

This is a study of the parable Jesus told about the ten virgins. In this parable, Jesus described five of the virgins as “wise” and five He called “foolish.” It’s interesting to note that, in the Greek (the original language of the New Testament), the word translated “foolish” is *moros* (from which the term “moron” was coined). *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* defines the word *moros* thus: “dull or stupid (as if shut up), i.e. heedless, (morally) blockhead . . .”ⁱⁱⁱ

Since Jesus told this parable to His followers (in hopes they’d choose to be wise), we’d like to visit the *Parable of the Ten Virgins* in a way that will help us understand just what made those foolish virgins foolish . . . and what made the wise virgins so wise.

This Bible study is a journey. It’s a journey that will lead you to discover more about yourself, your faith, and what the Lord is looking for in your life. Are you willing to go on the journey with these ten virgins? Are you willing to see them as people, like you and me, to look at them with honesty, and then to look at your own life with the same honesty? If so, you’ve already taken a big step toward becoming a WISE virgin! No one but you and the Lord will see the answers you give to the questions in the study (unless *you* choose to share them with others). Be honest with yourself—and be wiser for it.

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All Bible quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the NIV, the New International Version of the Bible.

Parable of the Ten Virgins

PART 1

First things first. Here is the parable in its entirety:

Matthew 25:1-13

[Jesus is speaking]

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Five of them were foolish and five were wise.

The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.

The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.

The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.

The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

"'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

"Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'

"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

-End Quote-

A parable is a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. Jesus used them often.

This parable (given its context—which we will discuss later) is about the return of Jesus Christ just prior to the “wedding feast” in Heaven with those who have trusted Him as Lord and Savior.

Side note: Numerous teachings on the *Parable of the Ten Virgins* depend heavily on “ancient Jewish customs” purported to surround betrothal and marriage to support their interpretations. We have not done this. While we believe that cultural context can enhance our understanding of scripture, it should never be elevated to a place equal to or greater than scripture itself. Ancient customs can be difficult to document. We find that especially true in this case—where solid references to these customs, seem to be lacking. We believe it is important to regard Scripture as the highest source and to allow scripture to interpret scripture—that is to look for the same concepts elsewhere in the Bible, and let the scriptures themselves speak to us about the meaning.

Ten Virgins Went Out to Meet the Bridegroom

Before we get to the *difference* between the wise and foolish women, let's look at what they all had in common:

All of them were called “virgins.”

- As you read the parable, what does the term “virgin” in the story imply to you?
- Since this is a parable, given by Jesus to impart a spiritual lesson, what do you think that the use of the term “virgin” might mean *spiritually*?

While the term for “virgin” used in this text *can* mean a literal virgin (sexually pure), it can also mean “a maiden; by implication, an unmarried daughter,⁴”—a general term—so we will let the context of the whole parable give the final determination of what Jesus may have intended.

All ten (not just the wise) thought they would to go out to meet the Bridegroom.

All ten of these women are together as they prepare to go out and meet the Groom—obviously each *assumes* that she is invited to the wedding feast.

Life example: I (*Terry*) remember years ago when I worked in a store. Two women regularly came into the store together. They were always talking about the wild lives they were living . . . sleeping with many men, partying, getting drunk, etc. They both seemed to think this was “normal,” that everyone did these things.

One day, I noticed one of the women was wearing a small medallion on a chain around her neck. I asked her what was on the medallion and she showed it to me. It said, “I am Catholic. If found unconscious, call a priest.” She told me wearing it ensured that, even if she was in a sudden accident, dying, and unable to communicate, she could still get “last rites” from a priest. She thought that her membership in the Roman Catholic Church meant that she was automatically invited to the feast and she'd been led to believe that the charm around her neck—in combination with a ceremony which could be performed even if she was unconscious—constituted a guaranteed ticket to the banquet. In short, she thought belonging to a religious group (and having a ceremony that reaffirmed her connection to this group) would save her no matter how she lived her life.

Many Protestants might scoff at this . . . while living lives that are every bit as calloused toward the One who paid such a great price for us.

Here are some facts regarding others who may be assuming they are going to the wedding feast. George Barna is the most quoted and respected pollster in mainstream Christianity today.

According to Mr. Barna: 72% of all Americans believe that people are blessed by God so they can enjoy life as much as possible, 58% believe the primary purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment, 53% believe that all people pray to the same god or spirit, no matter what name they use for that spiritual being, 55% believe that if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others during their lifetime, they will earn a place in heaven.ⁱⁱⁱ

Will you ask yourself a few questions with the willingness to be honest about what you really think? Let your *heart* answer “yes,” “no,” or “I’m not sure” to the following:

- Do I believe that my membership in a church or religious group will qualify me for Heaven? Do I trust that the rites and ceremonies performed by others on my behalf will make me right with God, even if I don’t relate to the Lord in a personal way? Does my life reflect my answer?
- Do I think God *wants* me to be self-sufficient (tend to my own needs and wants) in most things (possibly so that He will have time to devote to more important problems or the needs of others)? Does the way I live my life reflect this view?
- Do I believe that people are blessed so that they can enjoy life as much as possible, that material blessings and health are a sign of God’s approval—that poverty or lack of good health are a sign of God’s disfavor? Does my judgment of myself and others reflect my answer?
- Do I *hope* that being a good person, or simply praying (to “a god” or spirit) will make me right with the Lord? Does my *conscience* agree with my answer?
- Have I ever made a deliberate decision to love and follow Jesus Christ? If so, is there anything about the way I live that shows I love Him? Would the Lord say that I have loved Him more than myself or others?

All ten took lamps with them.

In scripture, both lamp and light are often equated with God’s word, with Jesus Christ who is called “the Word of God,” and with our living testimony to the Lord.

2 Samuel 22:29 You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light.

Job 29:2-3 How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness!

Psalms 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Revelation 21:3 The city [of God] does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.” [Comment in brackets added for clarity]

According to Jesus, in the parable of the ten virgins *all of the virgins had lamps*. Many Christians, (especially those in the West) have at least one Bible in their home. Most would say they have heard or read at least *parts* of the Bible.

Answer the following with the willingness to be honest about what you really think. Let your *heart* answer “yes,” “no,” or “I’m not sure” to the following: Do I believe that reading the Bible makes people right with God? Do I assume that someone who knows a lot of Scripture knows God?

In the book of Acts, the Christians in a place called Berea were commended for checking to see if what Paul the apostle taught them actually lined up with what Scripture said. This was not considered rude or rebellious on their part, but a wise thing to do.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

And yet, the mere act of searching, knowing, or memorizing Scripture will not save us.

Matthew 5:39-40 [Jesus speaking] “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

The Pharisees (to whom Jesus was speaking in the above verse) knew the scriptures by heart! They spent many long hours memorizing and quoting God’s word. Sadly, however, the motive many of them had for doing this was not to know God, but to find ways to manipulate it to their own benefit, to occupy positions of authority, and to justify themselves.

All ten (not just the foolish) slept.

Jesus said, the Bridegroom was “a long time in coming.” Apparently, it was a long time by the standards of all ten virgins, for Jesus went on to say that *all* of them fell asleep.

Not too many days after He told this parable, when Jesus was about to be betrayed, He took eleven of the disciples to the garden of Gethsemane. Even though Jesus told the disciples He was about to be betrayed and killed—and pleaded with them to watch and pray . . . they fell asleep.

All of them fell asleep. Their spirits may have been willing, but they couldn't stay awake. None of these men had the intent of "failing" the Lord, but they all eventually fell asleep. Although Jesus was disappointed at this, none of them was excluded from rising up and serving Him in the days that followed.

In the end, none of us will be able to claim that we were perfect witnesses, no one will be able to say that he/she served without failure.

HONESTY CHECK!

- Have I hesitated making a decision to accept Jesus Christ because I fear I might “fail” Him?

A fear of failure in life can work its way into spiritual life as well. If you have stopped short of becoming a disciple because you fear you will not perform perfectly . . . remember what Paul the apostle said: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” [Philippians 4:13, KJV] It’s only *in Christ* that *any* of us succeeds. While we will receive rewards for the works we’ve done *in Christ* (at His direction and in His strength), none of us can claim righteousness other than what Jesus’ gives us through His death on the cross. This is true the day we get saved . . . and it’s still true after a lifetime of service to God.

All ten were awakened by a cry at midnight.

"At midnight the cry rang out: `Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

All ten women awoke. They all knew they must prepare to meet the Bridegroom. Anyone who wanted to see Him had to “go out” to meet him, so there was still some distance to go.

Many of the people we meet are unwilling to make commitments. *What if I commit to the wrong thing (or the wrong person)? What if I end up looking foolish?* Some apply this same line of thinking to their spiritual life. They reason, *The things I hear about Jesus are mostly appealing, but I'm not sure I want to make a commitment to Him. To seriously follow Jesus, I might have to give up some of the things I like to do. There are all sorts of people who claim to know the “truth” and there are all sorts of religions out there. The Bible says Jesus will come back. I can wait until I see sure signs that He is real or I can wait until He’s on His way and make a commitment then.*

HONESTY CHECK!

- Do I secretly think I can hang around the fringes of Christianity and make a stronger commitment once I see proof that Jesus is real?
- Have I believed what the Bible says but decided to wait for a definite “sign” that He is coming back before I change my lifestyle? Have I told myself that, “Even if I have to suffer because I waited for a sign, at least I’ll have the comfort of being *sure* I made the right choice”?
- Have I counted on having time in the future to make a decision?

Life example: I (Jo Ann) have had the privilege of raising four beautiful sons. When my son Nick was 24 years old, he thought himself on edge of launching a successful life. He'd just completed 5-years of service in the United States Marines and had returned to his home state, gotten a wonderful job in his chosen field, had an attractive apartment, new vehicle, and a sweet girl who adored him. Following the terrorist strikes on 9-11 he was called up and returned to the east coast to serve. He was disappointed that he was not allowed to return to his original unit that was preparing to go to the Persian Gulf, but was instead assigned as an MP to serve as security here in the States. I have to admit that, as his mother, I breathed a sigh of relief—glad he would not be returning to the gulf area. I thought he was “safe” here. But on Mother’s Day 2002—while out on a Sunday drive with his sweetheart—he swerved to miss a deer and his vehicle ended upside down in a deep canal.

The trauma of the day still leaves gaps in her memory, but his intended believes he pushed her through his window before he drowned.

This life is fleeting. There is no guarantee of a tomorrow.

The Bible tells us about a man who thought he could afford to wait.

Acts 24: 24-25 Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."

Just remember that a more “convenient moment” may *never* arrive for you. Remember also, that receiving salvation isn’t complicated. Salvation is simple. It’s an exchange. Your **un**righteous life for Christ’s righteous life. His undeserved punishment for your deserved punishment.

The bad news is: none of us can ever meet God’s standard of holiness.

Romans 3:11 says, "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"

Romans 3:23 adds, "... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

But the Good News of the Gospel is this: that God provided payment for sin in the death of Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:24 -25 says, “. . .yet now God declares us ‘not guilty’ of offending him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his kindness freely takes away our sins. For God sent Christ Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to end all God’s anger against us. He used Christ’s blood and our faith as the means of saving us from his wrath.”—The Living Bible

We must come to God empty handed, fully acknowledging our sin, expressing a willingness to turn from our ways and make Christ our Lord—believing that He was the only begotten Son of God who died in our place—then receiving His gift of a clean slate and eternal life gained in His victory over death through His resurrection. Once you have acknowledged your need to God, recognized and accepted His provision in Jesus, and given Him the reigns of your life, thank Him and ask Him to send His Holy Spirit to teach you and help you live a life that honors Him.

Sample prayer: *Dear heavenly Father, I sense You reaching out to me today, and I want to respond by inviting you into my life. I’m sorry for my sins, and I want to leave them behind. I want a fresh start. I give you permission to work in my life starting now. Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God, that you came to earth, that you died in my place, and that you rose from the dead. I invite you to come and live in me. Please send Your Holy Spirit to lead me into all truth, and guide me in Your ways.*

I ask this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

All ten virgins trimmed their lamps.

What does it mean to “trim” a lamp? Well, if you’ve ever used an oil lamp with a wick, you know that the wick is made of a natural material that draws up the oil so it can be slowly burned and give light over a sustained period of time. In scripture a “wick” can represent a person’s life.

Isaiah 42: 1-3 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. (These same verses are applied to Jesus—as the chosen one—in Matthew 12:15-21)

There are three different views about “wicks” we want to present here. See if one of them applies to your life/walk with the Lord.

First possibility: It’s interesting to note that when a lamp has too much wick exposed, there will be a bright flame, but the wick will be wasted and *burn out* long before its time. The wick is the

means of delivering *oil* to the flame, it's not intended to serve as the source for the flame itself. When too much wick is burning, there will be a lot of damaging smoke.

HONESTY CHECK

- Do I think that showy displays in God's name will win me His favor?

Matthew 7:22-23 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Galatians 5:25-26 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another.

God may honor the needs of others and help them through you, but merely *doing* things in the name of the Lord doesn't make you right with Him. Do you need to pray and ask God to forgive you for walking (and maybe encouraging others) to walk in the light of your works?

Sample prayer: *Father, somehow, it's become all about me and not about You. Forgive me. More than I want others to know who I am, more than I want praise on this earth, I want You to know me. I want the joy of hearing You say, "Well done!" in eternity. Show me where I've used Your gifts for my own glory. Help me to do only those things that honor You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Second possibility: When too *little* wick is exposed, the result is a diminished amount of light or a lamp that won't light at all. Every once in a while, we come upon a circumstance that makes us stop and consider the shortness of life. It could be a near-death experience, a bad report from the doctor, the loss of a loved one, noticing the increasing slide of society towards darkness. Any or all of these factors can set us thinking about what time we have left . . . and what we'll do with it. Some will begin seeking God in earnest. Others may seek ways to a "higher spiritual life" through self-denial.

HONESTY CHECK

- Do I think that by "trimming" *things*—excesses, foods, pleasures— out of my life or religiously following certain regimens I can cleanse myself and please God?

1 Timothy 4:1-5 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.

Colossians 2:16-23 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for

the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Thinking that we are making our way into deeper spiritual life by self-restraint is a lie. *Jesus* is our only means of deeper life.

Do you need to pray and ask God to set you free from empty religious practices?

Sample prayer: *Dearest Father, I thought I could be "spiritual" by following laws regarding the flesh. By doing this, I have denied the freedom Jesus bought for me at the cross. I have feared what I might do with the grace He gave me. Forgive me Lord—teach me to walk in the "law of love" with the Holy Spirit's help. Keep me from sin and open my ears to Your voice. In Jesus' Name I pray, Amen.*

Third possibility: Each time you light an oil lamp, you should trim the burnt part of the wick off. Burnt, uneven wick will affect the quality of the flame and cause smoking.

The burnt wick is the remnant of yesterday's wick. Yesterday (the past) may have been good for you . . . or it may be strewn with the litter of a thousand mistakes . . . or marred by the cruelty of others. But, to quote an old song, *yesterday's gone*. Have you ever thought about the fact that one of the names of Jesus is I AM—not I WAS. Yes, He was there in the past and, yes, He'll be here in the future, but what we have is NOW, and Jesus wants to move in you, to minister TO you now.

HONESTY CHECK

- Do I live in the past? Do I mentally "play the old tapes" of the past over and over again? Do these memories keep me from moving forward with the things Jesus wants to do right now?

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. [underline added]

1 Corinthians 7:10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. [underline added]

2 Corinthians 5:17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

- Have I let the thoughtless, cruel, or abusive acts of others in my past control the direction of my life? Do thoughts of anger and/or revenge consume me, steal my joy, and rob my energy?

Although the Lord wants us to reflect on what He has done in our past (where He has redeemed our mistakes, loved us when we were unlovable, or given us victory over darkness), these things shouldn't be where we live. If your trip down memory lane is neither inspiring you to repentance nor kindling faith for what you face right now, know that it's a wasted trip. Whether you are going through a hard trial or riding a wave of success right now, Jesus wants to be Lord over your TODAY, not just to sit with you and watch reruns of your yesterday. The old can be remembered on appropriate occasions (with eyes of faith) but the past shouldn't rule our *now*—*Jesus* should. Do you need to pray and ask God to set you free from the past? As long as you carry yesterday in your closed hand, you're taking it with you wherever you go, letting *it* decide who you are and what you'll do.

Do you need to pray about letting go?

Sample prayer: *Father, I release (name the person/situation) into Your hands. I am receiving grace from You, and as an act of faith, I'm letting go of the thoughts that have held me, (and/or the memories of things that hurt me.) In Jesus' Name I pray, Amen*

We want to restate here that *all ten* virgins trimmed their lamps. The foolish may have just been copying the wise. Another possibility is that, given the lateness of the hour—the closing moments before the Bridegroom returned—they sensed the time for operating “in the flesh” was over.

Here ends the list of the things all ten virgins had in common. In these external ways, they had an *outward appearance* of being the same . . . yet five were considered foolish. Jesus would soon emphasize the important difference between them. The virgins Jesus termed “foolish” were lacking an essential commodity that reflected an *inward attitude*, something they could neither pretend they had, nor borrow—oil. In Part 2 of our study, we will discuss OIL—what it is not, what it is, and how to get some of your own.

If there are areas the Lord has highlighted in your heart during this study, areas that need repentance or prayer—don't put it off. Seek His face, receive His forgiveness, and be set free—today. Also know that a prayer for salvation or for the Lord's help isn't meant to be a stand-alone event in your life . . . it's meant to be the beginning of a journey with the God who wants to be your Friend for a lifetime and beyond.

End of Part 1

Part 2 of this study will be posted soon at www.wildflowerpress.biz! Click the "Articles" tab and scroll down to "Studies"

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ⁱ Moron: Wikipedia—<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Moron&oldid=30603448>

ⁱⁱ Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D, (Abingdon Press, 1986, assigned to World Bible Publishers, Inc., Iowa Falls, Iowa)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Second Coming of the Church, A Blueprint For Survival, by George Barna, (Nashville, TN, Word Publishing, 1998), pp 21-22