

HERE COMES THE BRIDEGROOM

by Ray C. Stedman

We began last Sunday a look at the parables of our Lord, and especially those which reveal the attitudes and activities of those who are waiting for his coming again. We shall look today at the well-known parable of the ten virgins or maidens. This parable is very appropriate to this May season because it concerns a wedding. May is "apple blossom time," as the old song reminds us,

Some day in May
I'll come to say
Happy the bride that
The sun shines on today.

But at the wedding referred to in this parable the bride is not much in evidence, in fact she does not appear at all. The parable concerns an absent bridegroom, and it is only incidentally about him for our Lord focuses primarily upon those who are waiting for the bridegroom. This is because the wedding in this parable is an Eastern wedding, and in the East customs are different than they are in the West. In the Eastern wedding the bridegroom is the important figure. He pays all the expenses of the wedding.

Having experienced a wedding in our family this last fall, I strongly believe we ought to get back to the Bible in these matters!

Our Lord is spotlighting the experience of ten young maidens who were waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. There may be young ladies here this morning who say, "I've been waiting for a bridegroom for a long time, but no one has appeared yet." But these young maidens were waiting in a quite different sense than some of you may have in mind. Their experience is described for us in the first six verses:

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'" {Matt 25:1-6 RSV}

Weddings were always held at night in the East, and, as far as I know, it is still the custom in these areas. Often the festivities lasted for an entire week and at any time during that week the bridal party was expected to appear. The bridegroom would come to get his bride and they would walk together to the site of the wedding, taking the longest possible route through the town. There would be various groups of people waiting at different corners to join the wedding party as they went toward the wedding. That is the background of the picture our Lord draws here.

Here are ten young girls waiting to join the wedding party. They are expecting the bridegroom (some accounts read, "and the bride") and therefore they are waiting expectantly.

Now, as in the previous parable of the household which was waiting for its absent lord, this parable obviously is intended to describe us. Our Lord knew at this time that he was soon going away. He knew there would be an intervening period of time before his return again and he is describing by means of these three parables what he means by his command, watch: "Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour when your lord comes," {Matt 25:13}. What he means by "watch" is brought out in these parables:

Last week we saw that the first parable indicates that watching involves understanding and obeying the Word of God. We are to feed upon the word. This is important because it is what God has put us here for. We so

easily lose our perspective on life. We think we have been put here to demonstrate our talents, or to make a living, or to live as comfortable a life as possible. All these things are part of God's blessing but the real reason we are here is to learn how to live, and we learn to live by the word of God -- not merely understanding it but actually working it out into life. Unless we learn to feed upon the Word we will never learn to live. That is why Jesus underscores this with tremendous emphasis, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," {cf, Matt 4:4}.

In this parable of the ten maidens we learn another phase of what "watching" means. Here is another challenge to find hidden truth. One of the exciting things about parables is to learn to discover such hidden truths and to dig them out by means of the clues that are given. Here is this story about ten girls, waiting for the bridegroom's coming and certain clues are given to us to reveal the meaning our Lord is after.

Notice, first of all, that there is a division among these ten. They fall into two groups: five were wise, and five were foolish. The first question therefore that immediately confronts us is, "What makes the difference?" In what way are five wise, and the other five foolish? You can see immediately that there were certain very similar things about all ten of them. They all had lamps, so that is not the ground of division. Also, they all had oil when they started; so it is not that. Further, they all were expecting the bridegroom's coming; they all had a sense of expectation. Also, when he was delayed, they all went to sleep. Though that does not mark the ground of division yet it is a very significant thing. In each of these parables the Lord clearly indicates that his second coming is going to be long delayed. Surely that is most important.

There are some who teach that Jesus was mistaken about the time of his return. They say that the Scriptures indicate that he was to come back immediately, and that all the early Christians expected him to return promptly because that is what he himself said. These teachers tell us that Jesus was wrong. He was obviously mistaken about the time of his return, so they reject completely his whole teaching concerning his return on the basis that he was mistaken about its timing. But Jesus did not teach a soon return at all. He clearly indicated, not only by implication and indirect statement, as in this parable, but also very specifically that it would be a long time before his return. The bridegroom would be delayed.

In the previous parable of the household there is the same thing. The servant says to himself, "My lord delays his coming," {Matt 24:48}.

Also in the following parable we find it even clearer. "After a long time" {Matt 25:19} the master comes to demand an accounting from his servants. Jesus clearly taught that it would be a long time before his return to earth again.

So, while they were waiting for the bridegroom, the ten maidens fell asleep. Here again some who read this parable misinterpret it and say that this is wrong; these girls should never have slept. They liken it to Christians who forget about the coming of the Lord, lose all interest in his appearing, and get involved in life's matters. But there is nothing in this story to indicate that it was wrong for these girls to sleep. It was a perfectly natural thing for them to do. After all, it was night, and since it was a festive occasion and they could not do any work there is no reason why they should not sleep. They were simply waiting for the bridegroom to appear, and, when he was delayed, it was only natural for them to catch a few winks while waiting. Doubtless they placed some kind of a watch to arouse them when the bridegroom does appear, for this is what happened. Our Lord never indicates any blame toward these maidens because they slept. The foolish slept, and the wise as well. We must be careful, in interpreting these stories, not to read into them things that are not implied.

It is, perhaps, suggestive that our Lord records that they all slept. This indicates that when he said "watch" he clearly did not mean that we are to be constantly thinking about his return. He underscores the fact that watching involves doing perfectly normal things while waiting. Work needs to be done. Babies must be changed. Buses must operate. Banks have to be run. Schools must be operated, and studies engaged in. Hospitals have to be open; all types of activities must go on. There is nothing wrong with this. To be involved in the natural normal affairs of life does not mean that you stopped waiting for the Lord's return; it is all part of the process, a perfectly normal part.

But now, according to the story, at midnight came a cry, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him."

That immediately plunges us into the rest of the story,

"Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour." {Matt 25:7-13 RSV}

It is immediately evident from this that the crucial difference between the wise and the foolish lay in the fact that the wise had extra oil. They all had oil to begin with, but the wise took along an extra supply. That is what made it possible for them to endure the unexpected delay of the bridegroom.

Surely that is the crucial point is it not?

The whole parable hangs on this one thing: There was with the wise an extra hidden supply of oil.

There are two things that are made clear by this part of the story: One is that without a light these maidens could not get into the marriage feast. Our Lord does not say why, but it is obviously clear that without a light they would not be admitted. The lamp -- or light -- is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of knowledge or understanding. We use it the same way today. We say, "I'd like a little more light on this subject," meaning "I need more knowledge of it." So it is in this story. All ten had some light, some knowledge or understanding, but five had a deeper, hidden, resource of light.

If we apply this to ourselves this morning, we can see how truly it fits. Every one here has a certain degree of light about our Lord's return and its relation to the course of history. In that respect we all have light amid the darkness of the age in which we live. We know more than those who do not understand this truth. We know there is a purpose to history, and that it is all going to end according to schedule. Symbolically, these maidens all had to have at least this much knowledge. Light was supplied by the oil, and therefore it was absolutely essential that they have an adequate supply of oil, otherwise their light would go out.

It is also clear from this account that they could not borrow another's supply. When the bridegroom came and their lights began to flicker from lack of oil, the foolish said to the wise, "Give us of your oil, for our lights are going out." But the wise said, "No, we cannot do that, otherwise we will not have enough for ourselves. You'll have to go yourself and get more." But it was too late. By the time the foolish returned, the door was shut, and they were met by this word of the Lord's, "I never knew you," and, of course, weddings are no place for strangers.

There are some who feel the Lord is very unfair here, that he should have let these maidens in. After all, they too were earnestly, sincerely waiting for his return, and the fact that they did not have enough oil was hardly their fault for they did not realize that he was going to be delayed. Therefore he ought to have let them in. But we must be careful, when we read these parables, not to read them from our limited point of view. The Lord is right about what he says; he always is. We therefore must not challenge his appraisal of a situation. He knows what he is talking about. When he excludes these five foolish ones he is revealing to us that we must seek seriously his reason for doing so. He says he never knew them, they were strangers to him. They never were a part of the true family, waiting for the bridegroom. We must understand what it is, then, which rendered them strangers. As we have already seen, it centers on this matter of the oil.

Oil, throughout the Scriptures, is commonly used as a type or picture of the Holy Spirit. Some of you remember that in the book of Zechariah the prophet was given a vision of two olive trees standing, one on either side of a lampstand, and the oil from the olive trees dripped into a bowl on top of the lampstand. It was the oil, constantly flowing down, which caused the lamps in the lampstand to burn. Zechariah was told that the oil symbolized the Spirit of God. It is here we have that great quotation which is frequently heard, although very few people realize where it is from. Zechariah is told, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,

says the Lord of hosts," {Zech 4:6b KJV}. The oil is a picture of the power of the Holy Spirit which keeps the light of knowledge and truth burning brightly.

This is also what we have here in this parable. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, revealing truth, revealing knowledge. The overall picture is that of a group of people very much like this congregation this morning. If we would take this parable as our Lord intended it to be taken, as a picture of those who are living in the time between his first coming and his second, who are waiting for his appearing and who have some understanding of the fact that he is coming again, then this congregation becomes very much the same kind of group as is described in the parable. There are certain wise among us who have an extra supply of oil, a supply adequate to meet the test of whatever may come. But there are also some among us, without question, who are foolish, who have been coming week after week agreeing with and understanding much of the doctrine of our Lord's return, but who lack an adequate supply of oil, who have never really discovered the full ministry of the Spirit. There is a ministry of the Holy Spirit to the minds and hearts of those who are not yet born again. He enlightens them to a degree, as they read the Bible, and they understand such truth as the Lord's return, but they have never yet come to the place where the truth has really gripped them. They have understood it, but it has not yet gripped and held them. They have not yet come into a personal knowledge of the One whom the truth is to reveal, the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the whole purpose of Bible study. It is not to learn merely what God is going to do with the world, or to understand your own psychological make-up; it is rather that you might come to understand and to know personally, in a day-by-day living relationship, the Lord Jesus Christ who has come to live within you. That is the basis for true life. That, of course, is the extra flask of oil hidden away inside. Those who have it do not look any different than anyone else. No one sees it there. But when the hour of testing comes, when the pressures come, their light does not go out. They will hold to the truth and maintain it.

That is the picture here in this parable. As life moves on, and cares press upon us, our early zeal as Christians fades and the excitement of knowing God dims. That is when the test comes. Then our knowledge of Christ must go deeper than the head; it must reach the heart. We must become basically changed by the truth. That is what our Lord is bringing out. There is a kind of Christian veneer which can be put on. You can learn in Sunday school how to act like a Christian. You can learn what Christian truth is, learn the doctrines of Christianity, learn the truth it teaches. You can fill your head with this kind of thing and display it on Sundays, but it will not make any essential difference in your life during the week, at home. These are the foolish. They have no extra oil. They have truth for the surface of life, but none for the depths, the crises. They know the doctrine of the Scripture, but they do not know the power of it. It is in their head but it has never reached the heart. They believe in Jesus as Savior, but they have never known him as a living Lord. That is what makes the difference. That is what our Lord is saying. Without that you cannot properly watch for his appearing.

As the days get more critical, as error becomes more believable and is more widespread, it becomes harder and harder to believe the truth. Only if the truth has actually gripped you, and you are held by the Son of God himself, will you be able to stand in the hour of testing. The wise have oil for the crisis hour. When the hard test comes and the pressures are on, their light does not flicker or gutter and go out in darkness. They do not give up -- or give in! The truth is not forsaken, but they cling to it even more closely. When the final summons comes they are ready to enter in. That is clearly, unmistakably, the picture our Lord draws, is it not?

It is quite possible for us to know many things about Christianity, but never really let it make any changes in our hearts or lives. I know many like this. They can quote Scripture by the yard. They know the doctrines, they are well acquainted with the Bible, but their homes are no different than others around. They live on the same basis, they judge by the same values. There is no real difference in their lives. Their reasons for doing things are exactly the reasons others have who are not Christians. It is these our Lord is describing. They will never stand the test.

I believe we are living in this kind of an hour. It has been most striking to me to note in the last few years that many whom I and others have thought were stable, solid Christians, have left the Christian faith, have denied the Lord who bought them, and have turned away from the truth. Just this last week Mr. Roper was telling me about some of the students at Stanford who once were with us here; earnest, vibrant, young Christians, obviously excited about what they were learning. But one of them is now a professed Communist. Another

one is drifting away and denying the reality of Christianity. What happened? How could this happen? It is because they did not have extra oil. The truth had never gone deep, never challenged the will. They had never bowed to the Lordship of Jesus or submitted themselves to him, committing themselves to follow him wherever he goes, so that even in the hour when Christianity does not look like it makes sense, they can say, with Peter, "Lord, to whom can we go? You alone have words of eternal life," {cf, John 6:68}. That is the ultimate test.

There comes a time when all the things we learn in Scripture -- its philosophy and its pattern of life -- can appear to us to be nonsense, to be untrustworthy, unreliable, and like the rest of knowledge around, to be uncertain, unsure. We can easily be afflicted this way, it can happen to us all. In that hour, what will hold you steady? If you have not yet come to a place of deep commitment to the Person of the Lord Jesus, you will not be held steady in that hour. All your knowledge will disappear. Something else will prove as attractive and as compelling in its logic as Christianity, and you will be ready to for that. It is only when, in the final analysis, you cannot forsake him, there is no place else to go, and though perhaps you are not sure that what he says will turn out to be right, nevertheless it is the best possible chance, that you will stand. That is the ultimate test. Jesus says those are the wise who are kept in times of pressure. When darkness settles upon the earth their lights do not go out because they are fed by a reserve supply of the Holy Spirit who dwells within them, to keep them in the time of pressure.

Are you ready for that?

That is what this parable is all about. If you do not have that quality of relationship of Jesus Christ, you will not stand the test.

You have never really been a Christian; that is what Jesus is saying. You have been a surface Christian, committed only to certain truths, but never to a Person; related only to certain doctrinal matters, but never gripped by a Lord who compels you, controls you, and runs your life. That will be the final test for the wise and the foolish.

What does our Lord mean by watching?

It means to know his Word, that is the first step. But now he adds a second element to that. That knowledge of the Word must go deeper than the surface. It must be an obedience of the heart, a trusting, a giving over completely of the central control of your life, your will, to the Lord Jesus Christ. This results in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who is the One who will hold you steady in the hour of crisis.

Are you wise? Or foolish?

Prayer

Our Father, you who know our hearts know who are the wise and who are foolish among us. Here we all are, waiting for the coming of the Lord, committed to the truth of Christianity, here because we believe Jesus is coming back again and that history will end as he says. Yet Lord, among us, as you have made so clear in this parable, there are some who do not have the extra supply of oil. They have light, but not enough; knowledge, but not an adequate supply. They still do not know you, Lord Jesus. We pray that here, in this place, and at this moment, any who by the Holy Spirit, realize that this is their condition, may right now correct it. May they commit themselves to the One who alone can sustain them in the approaching hour of darkness. We ask in his name, Amen.

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