

At most weddings, there are bridesmaids and groomsmen who prepare for the wedding and help make sure everything goes smoothly. Likewise in biblical times bridesmaids were selected. Their responsibility was to wait for the groom, who would come unannounced, usually at night. They then would light their oil lamps, which would be bowls with wicks placed on wooden poles, and go on in a procession with the bridegroom to the house where the wedding feast was. In order to keep the lamps lit, the bridesmaids would have to carry oil with them. On this cultural practice, Jesus bases the parable of the ten virgins (i.e. bridesmaids) in Matthew 25.

To understand the meaning of the parable, we must look at the context. Matthew 24-25 contains what is known as the Olivet Discourse, which is about the signs by which we will recognize Jesus' second coming and the need to be ready for His return because we do not know the day or the hour (Matthew 24:1-4, 23-27, 30, 37, 42-44). The signs of His coming are so that we will not be deceived. But the lack of knowledge of the exact time when He will come is to keep us watchful. We must be alert because we don't know when He will come. But when He comes, there will be no doubt it is Him.

All ten bridesmaids had the same responsibility. They all had lamps, they all were supposed to bring oil, they all fell asleep, and they all lit their lamps when the bridegroom approached. The only difference was that the wise virgins were prepared and the foolish ones were not. The conclusion is clear. We must be prepared for Jesus' coming. But what does the oil in the parable represent? Different commentators have different answers to this question. One possibility is that it represents good works. Light is associated with good works in Matthew 5:16. Also the parables that precede and follow the parable of the ten virgins (the parable of the faithful and wicked servants and the parable of the talents) also concern being about the master's business when he returns. Another possibility is that the oil represents faith, both in terms of trusting in Jesus and being faithful to Him in our lives. This means trusting in the promise that He will return, and living by faith every day. The third possibility is that the oil is the Holy Spirit, who keeps the flame of faith burning and transforms us into the likeness of Jesus. All

three explanations make sense because faith and the good works that come from faith both are products of the Holy Spirit.

However, yet another explanation is evidenced by v. 12, in which the bridegroom tells the foolish virgins that he doesn't know them. This recalls Matthew 7:23, in which those who don't know Jesus are cast away from His presence. This suggests that the oil is personal knowledge of the bridegroom. We must know Jesus before He comes again. This knowledge is personal experience with Jesus and a personal commitment to Him, which is made possible by the Holy Spirit who gives us faith and good works. It means receiving and living out the gift He has given to us. But the gospel message in this parable is that the bridegroom himself is the one who provided the oil. Through His blood, Jesus makes this relationship possible. We can't know Him ourselves by our own effort. Jesus initiated it. He gave us this new life through the Holy Spirit, who makes Him knowable to us. To be ready to receive Him when He comes, we must already have received Him.

Can you say you know Jesus personally, rather than just saying you know about Him? To know Him means to act according to what you know. It is not enough to hear truth, to see the light, or to know what Jesus did. You must live the truth, walk in the light, and follow Jesus daily. Our walk is enabled by the Spirit He sent to dwell in us. Are you growing in this relationship with Jesus? Do you love and obey Him? Are you receiving His grace and love, and it is overflowing to everyone around you? Our goal, as expressed in the hymn "Day by Day," should be to see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly. Nobody has or ever will be able to predict when Jesus will come back, so let us be ready.

Many among us, including myself, struggle with living with the same passion for His return as those in the early church had. Perhaps there is a secret suspicion that He will not come back. Perhaps we love this world more than the one to come. Or are we tired of waiting and enduring? Let us pray that we can gain this passion for Jesus' return, because without it, His prior work would make no sense; it would be incomplete. Let us therefore be watchful and ready. Let us seek first His kingdom and pray that He comes back quickly.