

# Living with Lamps Ablaze

Thomas Robinson, *Matthew—Conflict and Vision* 5, February 28, 2016

## **Matthew 24:45 – 25:13** (Cf Lk 12:41-46)

### **Parables of the Faithful Servant and the Corrupt Servant**

<sup>45</sup> “Who then is the **faithful** and **prudent servant**, whom his Lord has **set over his household**, to give them their food at the proper time? <sup>46</sup> **Blessed** is that servant whom his **Lord will find so doing when he comes**. <sup>47</sup> Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.

<sup>48</sup> But if that **corrupt servant** says to himself, ‘**My Lord is delayed**,’ <sup>49</sup> and begins **to beat his fellow servants** and eats and drinks with **drunkards**, <sup>50</sup> the Lord of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know <sup>51</sup> and will rip him to shreds and put him with **the hypocrites**. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

### **Parable of the Foolish and Smart Maidens and their Lamps**

**25:**<sup>1</sup> Then the **kingdom of heaven** will be like **ten maidens** who took their lamps and went to meet the **bridegroom**. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were **foolish** (*moros*), and five were **prudent** (*phronimos*).

<sup>3</sup> For when the **foolish** took their lamps, they took **no oil** with them, <sup>4</sup> but the **prudent** ones took **containers of oil** with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> As the **bridegroom was delayed**, they **all** became drowsy and **slept**.

<sup>6</sup> But **at midnight** there was a cry, ‘Here is the **bridegroom!** Come out to meet him.’

<sup>7</sup> Then all those maidens rose and **set their lamps in order**. <sup>8</sup> And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for **our lamps are going out**.’

<sup>9</sup> But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and **buy for yourselves**.’

<sup>10</sup> And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and **those who were ready** went in with him to the **marriage feast**, and the door was shut.

<sup>11</sup> Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, ‘**Lord, lord**, open to us.’

<sup>12</sup> But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, **I do not know you**.’

<sup>13</sup> **Keep awake** therefore, for **you do not know** either the day or the hour.”

---

## **Matthew 7:21-23**

<sup>21</sup> “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’

<sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

<sup>24</sup> Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise/prudent (*phronimos*) man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

<sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish (*moros*) man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

## **Ephesians 5:13-20**

<sup>13</sup> When anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for what truly becomes visible is light itself.

<sup>14</sup> Therefore it says, “Awake, You sleeper, and rise from the dead, | and the Messiah will shine on you.”

<sup>15</sup> Watch accurately then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Don’t become unthinking, but learn to grasp what the will of the Lord is.

## 1 Thessalonians 5:5-6

<sup>5</sup> For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

---

## Parables of Wisdom and Surprise

In this last section of Jesus' teaching, Matthew records a series of parables, one of Jesus' most characteristic ways of teaching. Parables are tricky. They range widely from a few words to a substantial story. Jesus often liked to take an easily recognizable situation, even a cliché, but give it an unexpected turn to plant an idea in our minds that we have to keep thinking about.

Here Jesus is responding to the disciples' questions about the destruction of the temple and his presence (*parousia*) as king, and the end of one age and beginning of the next (Mt 24:1-3).

As we've seen, it's hard for us to stay with them in that moment when we know so much of later history. They know nothing of Jesus' resurrection, inclusion of Gentiles, war with Rome; and certainly nothing of a "second coming." They expect a kingdom, age to come, & judgment.

Jesus assures them that earthshaking, astonishing events are unfolding quickly that they will experience, but also stresses what they don't know, what no one knows. But they'll take part in that future and need to be open to surprising events that will change the world they know.

The three parables here on one level are very simple: "Be wise. Be prepared." But Jesus gives that wisdom in parables to plant a sticky image in our imagination to push us to think about what it means to live into a future that is moving toward God's purpose, but open-ended on our scale.

## Thinking about the Heart of Life

The first two take us into a cliché story situation: the servant whose master is away. The first is the good servant: "faithful" and "prudent/wise/thinking" (*phronimos* from a verb to think). His lord has given him responsibilities over other household servants, to serve them by giving them nourishment. He doesn't know when the lord's coming home. He doesn't spend his time watching, preparing for the moment of return. He thinks. Who am I? I'm a servant with a job. What's my job? I'll do that right now. Nothing spectacular. Just faithfulness in serving others. The master comes home. It doesn't matter when. The servant looks up and sees him gladly.

The contrasting bad/corrupt (*kakos*) servant, thinks he knows when the master will return and evaluate his work. He surely wants to make a good showing, but thinks he has time. What matters is only the moment of evaluation, the show. He has not internalized any of the responsibility the master has given him. Absence mean irresponsibility, authority means intimidation, self-serving rather than serving others. The lord puts him with the "externalists."

## Thinking Clearly when You Don't Know

The thoughtless and thinking maidens are part of the bride's party who would await the groom.

A wedding was the groom getting the bride from her family home taking her to his home and having a party. Again, Jesus emphasizes prudence/thinking. Being ready to do the task they're committed to do. The groom's scheduled to come in early evening but doesn't till midnight.

The foolish are prepared if all goes according to expectation, but can't deal with the unexpected.

The thinking ones keep their lamps burning through whatever happens. Again, Jesus doesn't praise heroic action (all take a nap!) but everyday care and faithfulness. Jesus makes the strange end of the parable parallel his teaching at the end of the Sermon on the mount. It is not those with spectacular religious power that Jesus knows, but those doing the challenging work of that sermon, internalizing the Kingdom and then living it externally. These he knows and welcomes.