

THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

The Gospel of Matthew clearly presents the “word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13), the truth in the New Testament concerning the believers’ responsibility and accountability to God for their life and service in the church age. In particular, the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 warns the believers of our need to grow to maturity in the divine life prior to the end of our lifetime in this age.

The Word of Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew

Christ, as the wonderful center of the entire Bible, is all-inclusive and has many aspects. The New Testament begins by presenting four biographies to portray four main aspects of this all-inclusive Christ. The Gospel of Matthew testifies that He is the King, the Christ of God prophesied in the Old Testament, who brings the kingdom of the heavens to the earth. This Gospel continually speaks of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens. Matthew 4:23, 9:35, and 24:14 all indicate that the content of this book is the “gospel of the kingdom.” The latter verse says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.” The Gospel of Mark, telling us that Christ is the Servant of God laboring for God faithfully, reveals the gospel of God, comprising the excellent deeds of the Slave-Savior in the saving service He rendered to sinners for God. The Gospel of Luke, presenting a full picture of Christ as the only proper and normal man who ever lived on this earth, unveils the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, which is carried out by the Savior of mankind, God among men, in His saving grace given to fallen mankind. The Gospel of John, unveils Christ as the Son of God, the very God Himself, who is life to God’s people; it is the gospel of life, showing us how Christ, the incarnate God, came as the embodiment of God, as illustrated by the tabernacle and the temple, so that man could contact Him and enter into Him to enjoy the riches contained in God.

The complete gospel preached in the New Testament includes not only forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47) and the imparting of life (John 20:31) but also the kingdom of the heavens. Therefore, the gospel is not only the gospel of God, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, the gospel of life, and the gospel of grace (Acts 20:24), but also the gospel of

the kingdom, which brings people not only into God’s salvation but also into the kingdom of the heavens. The gospel of grace emphasizes forgiveness of sins, God’s redemption, and eternal life, whereas the gospel of the kingdom revealed in Matthew emphasizes the heavenly ruling of God and the authority of the Lord.

Because of this, Matthew speaks more of “the word of righteousness” than the other Gospels. In chapters five through seven, this Gospel presents the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens, unveiling the spiritual living and heavenly principles of the kingdom of the heavens. Such a living with its principles is according to the righteousness which surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), and it is carried out through the righteous deeds of the kingdom people (6:1). The constitution of the kingdom of the heavens comprises a new law (5:17-48), as repeatedly expressed by the Lord’s words, “But I say to (or, tell) you,” in contrast to “you have heard” or “it was said” (vv. 21-22, 27-28, 31-34, 38-39, 43-44). This demand of the new law of the kingdom is much higher than the requirement of the law of the old dispensation, culminating with the charge, “You therefore shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). Matthew speaks in the most serious terms of the relationships of the kingdom people in the light of the Lord’s judgment (18:1-35). It also speaks concerning the reward of the kingdom (16:24-27; 19:27—20:16; 22:1-14), and it contains the most significant prophetic parables concerning the coming kingdom and the believers’ accountability to God (24:32—25:30). These parables concerning watchfulness, readiness, and faithfulness are spoken to the church in particular, not to the Jews or to unbelievers as is sometimes supposed. Thus, according to the general thought of Matthew, it is right to interpret many of the Lord’s words in this book as the word of righteousness concerning the believers’ accountability to God in the light of the kingdom of the heavens and the kingdom reward.

The Prophecy of the Kingdom in Matthew 24 and 25

In this column we will look at the first of the very significant parables in Matthew 25. In 24:3 the disciples asked, “When will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming and of the consummation of the age?” The Lord’s great prophecy concerning the kingdom in

Matthew 24 and 25 is His answer to His disciples' question. It is of paramount importance that the Lord's great prophecy in this passage be rightly divided and cut straight. Otherwise, the crucial word to the believers in the church age, in 24:32—25:30, could be wrongly relegated either to the Jews or to the nations. The Lord's answer to His disciples has three sections. The first section in 24:4-31 concerns the Jews, the chosen ones, and should be interpreted literally. This prophecy includes matters and events from Christ's ascension to the time of the great tribulation, which will be the consummation, the end, of this age, and it also speaks concerning Christ's coming to the earth and the gathering of Israel. That this section concerns the Jews is indicated by references to "the chosen" and "His chosen" (vv. 22, 24, 31), to Judea (v. 16), to the Sabbath (v. 20), and to the tribes of the land (v. 30).

The second section of the Lord's great prophecy, in 24:32—25:30, concerns the church and should be interpreted spiritually. This is mainly indicated by the fact that this section is spoken in parables. The Lord said that He spoke in parables to His disciples because it was given to them, not to those in Judaism, to know the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens (13:11-13). In the Lord's speaking to the Jews in 24:20, for example, *winter* is the actual winter, but in His speaking to the church in verse 32, *summer* is a symbol signifying the time of restoration. It is important to see that this section of prophecy was spoken to the disciples as New Testament believers, not to the Jews. Concerning the disciples' dual status as Jews and believers in the New Testament, Witness Lee writes,

The disciples, the audience for the Lord's word here, had a twofold status, one as representatives of the remnant of the Jews and the other as the New Testament believers, who constitute the church. In the section of the Lord's word that concerns the Jews (vv. 4-31), the disciples represent the remnant of the Jews, whereas in the section that concerns the church (24:32—25:30), they represent the New Testament believers. In the four Gospels, in matters regarding outward circumstances, the Lord treated His disciples as Jews, but in matters concerning spirit and life, He considered them New Testament believers. (Recovery Version, Matt. 24:20, note 2)

The third section of the Lord's speaking, in 25:31-46, concerns the Gentiles, the nations, as indicated especially by verse 32, and also should be interpreted as referring to the literal events of a particular judgment. Of the nations who are alive during the great tribulation, the "sheep" will inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world; that is, they will be transferred into the millennium to be the people living under the kingly ruling of Christ and the overcoming believers and under the priestly ministry of the saved Jews. This is not equivalent to eternal

salvation in the divine life. The "goats," on the other hand, will be cursed and sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Both categories, the sheep and the goats, will be judged based on their care for the believers under the persecution of the Antichrist, not by their response to the saving work of Christ. This clearly indicates that they are neither Jews nor New Testament believers. (Concerning the judgment of the unbelievers who are alive at the Lord's coming, see "The Judgment Seat of Christ," *Affirmation & Critique*, IV.3, July 1999, pp. 54-56.) This clear division of the great prophecy of the kingdom in Matthew 24 and 25 into portions concerning the Jews, the church, and the nations is crucial for our understanding of the parable of the ten virgins. This parable is the word of righteousness, a sober warning given specifically to the believers in the church age.

The Ten Virgins Signifying Believers in the Church Age

The parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 concerns the watchfulness of the believers related to the Lord's second coming. We will examine this parable in particular because it is a direct extension of the subject covered in the previous column of "The Word of Righteousness." (See "The Believers' Passage through Death," *Affirmation & Critique*, V.2, April 2000, pp. 101-114.) It is a parable of the believers' need to grow in the divine life prior to their passage through death into a time and place of rest, where they await the coming of the Lord as the Bridegroom to claim His bride and enjoy the wedding feast with His mature, ready, and faithful ones. This parable begins, "At that time the kingdom of the heavens will be likened to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom" (v. 1). *At that time* refers to the Lord's word in 24:32-44. Verses 36-37 say, "But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of the heavens nor the Son, but the Father only. For just as the days of Noah were, so will the coming of the Son of Man be." The Lord continues in verse 40 with, "At that time...." Clearly then, *at that time*, both in verse 40 and 25:1, refers to the day and the hour of the coming of the Son of Man. Moreover, the repetition of this phrase ties the parables concerning watching and being ready in chapter twenty-four with the parables of watchfulness and faithfulness in chapter twenty-five into a single group.

The designation *virgins* further indicates that the parable in verses 1-13 is a parable for the believers. Virgins signify believers viewed from the aspect of life rather than service. Believers, who are the kingdom people, are like chaste virgins. Being a virgin is not a matter of what we do or are able to do; it is absolutely a matter of what we are. Believers, as virgins, are foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 31:3-4 says, "Jehovah appeared to me from afar, saying, / Indeed I have loved you with an eternal love, / Therefore I have drawn you with

lovingkindness. / I will build you again, and you will be built, / O virgin of Israel." Israel, as a virgin to the Lord, is the object of His eternal love. In the present age, however, the believers, as the true seed of Abraham according to faith, are built to become the church, the fulfillment of the bride, as typified by Israel. In Psalm 45:13-14 virgins are pictured as the companions to the King's daughter, another type of the church as the bride of Christ: "The King's daughter is all glorious within the royal abode; / Her garment is a woven work inwrought with gold. / She will be led to the King in embroidered clothing; / The virgins behind her, her companions, / Will be brought to You." In the New Testament, *virgin* (παρθένος) is used only in its literal sense and as a metaphor in general for the believers and in particular for the chaste, living overcomers raptured to the heavens prior to the great tribulation (Rev. 14:4). In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul said, "For I am jealous over you with a jealousy of God; for I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." Paul betrothed the New Testament believers to be the bride for the Bridegroom, the wife of the Lamb (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7).

Expositors of Matthew 25 often point out that the virgins here are the companions of the bride and not, strictly speaking, the bride herself. This may seem to cast doubt on who these virgins represent, but a simple understanding removes all doubt. In the oriental custom of marriage in the ancient times, the bridegroom left his house at a certain time and day and proceeded festively through the streets with his companions to the house of the bride, who was waited upon by her bridesmaids. It is these bridesmaids that the parable of the virgins seems to denote. This historical allusion does not, however, compromise the proper interpretation of the virgins as believers in the church. Alford does well to resolve this nuance. Referring to the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14 and to that of the virgins in chapter twenty-five, he says, "In both the wedding parables (see ch. xxii.) the *bride* does not appear—for she, being the Church, is in fact the aggregate of the guests in the one case, and of the companions in the other" (248). Lange follows similarly:

The *virgins* are not merely companions of the bride, but representatives of the bride, the Church....The Church, in her aggregate and ideal unity, is the bride; the members of the Church, as individually called, are guests; in their separation from the world, and expectation of the Lord's coming, they are His virgins. (437)

Lenski is very direct on this matter: "These ten virgins represent all the followers of Christ during all the ages" (963). We certainly expect that by *followers of Christ* Lenski means genuine followers, that is, true believers. It seems that the Lord chose virgins as a sign in order to emphasize the position and responsibility of the believers as individuals, rather than the bride herself, which would have emphasized the responsibility of the church corporately. That the virgins signify the believers in their individual responsibility before the Lord is also indicated by the division of the virgins into two groups of five. Five is composed of four plus one, signifying man the creature (Ezek. 1:5; Rev. 6:1) and God the Creator; man with God added to him bears responsibility. As we shall see, all the believers bear the responsibility of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Many readers have made the mistake of considering the five foolish virgins to be false Christians. However, all ten virgins signify genuine believers. Because some believers are foolish does not mean that they are false; one may be foolish and yet still be genuine. That the virgins represent the true believers throughout the church age is further denoted by the simple, direct words of the parable itself. Matthew 25:1 says that the virgins "went forth" to meet the bridegroom. Only true believers go forth to meet the Lord. The virgins do not linger or settle in any place; instead, they go out of the world. Alford says,

The interpretation is—these are souls come out from the world

into the Church, and there waiting for the coming of the Lord—not hypocrites, but *faithful souls, bearing their lamps* (τ. λ. ἐαυτῶν, cf. 1 Thess. iv. 4)—the inner spiritual life fed with the oil of God's Spirit. (249)

Darby sharply contrasts the virgins with the Jews, saying,

That which characterised the faithful at this period was that they came out from the world, from Judaism, from everything, even religion connected with the world, to go and meet the coming Lord. The Jewish remnant, on the contrary, wait for Him in the place where they are. (3:168-169)

Lockyer further distinguishes them from unbelievers professing to be Christians: "There are those who say that the five *foolish* virgins typify the lost, those whose hearts are destitute of divine grace, but 'virgin' is not an appropriate figure of speech of an unregenerate sinner" (239). He goes on to concur that those who revile and persecute the gospel are not good enough to be named even among the

foolish virgins. As we have seen, these virgins are the components of the aggregate symbol of the church, the bride, who takes Christ as her Bridegroom. Clearly, it is genuine believers alone who possess Christ in this most precious and intimate aspect. We the believers are the virgins who go out of the world, and Christ is the Bridegroom who returns to the earth to claim His bride; while we are going, He is coming. Moreover, all ten virgins have lamps that, at least at first, are lit and burning. Says Alford,

All views of this parable which represent the foolish virgins as having only a *dead faith*, only the lamp without the light, the body without the spirit, &c., are *quite beside the purpose*;—the lamps (see ver. 8) were *all burning* at first, and for a certain time. (249)

As we shall see, this indicates that all ten are regenerated in their human spirit by the indwelling Spirit of God.

God's Economy to Dispense Himself into Man, a Tripartite Being

The intrinsic, underlying significance of the parable of the virgins is that God has an eternal economy to dispense Himself in His Divine Trinity into man, whom He created a tripartite being as His vessel. Matthew 25:1-4 says,

At that time the kingdom of the heavens will be likened to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish and five were prudent. For the foolish, when they took their lamps, did not take oil with them; but the prudent took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

The central figures of this passage are lamps, vessels, and oil. Oil signifies the Holy Spirit who fills our spirit and eventually our whole inward being. Isaiah 61:1 is the prophetic word of Christ, the Anointed of Jehovah. It begins, "The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon Me, / Because Jehovah has anointed Me." This word, repeated in Luke 4:18, is fulfilled in Matthew 3:16 and Luke 3:22, in which the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form as a dove upon Christ. Hebrews 1:9, quoting Psalm 45:7, says that God anointed Christ with the "oil of exultant joy." The oil in Hebrews 1 and Psalm 45 is the Spirit in Isaiah 61, Matthew 3, and Luke 3. Oil as a type of the Spirit is best portrayed in Leviticus 2, concerning the meal offering. Verse 4 says, "And when you present an offering of a meal offering baked in the oven, it shall be of fine flour, unleavened cakes mingled with oil or unleavened wafers anointed with oil." Concerning the oil, Darby says,

The cake was made mingled with oil, just as the human nature of Christ had its being and character, its taste, from the Holy Ghost, of which oil is ever and the known symbol....The cakes were to be anointed with oil; and it is

written how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power. (1:157-158)

Mackintosh speaks in great detail and with much enlightenment concerning the type of the meal offering. Concerning the oil he says,

The "oil," in the meat-offering, is a type of the Holy Ghost. But inasmuch as the oil is applied in a twofold way, so we have the Holy Ghost presented in a double aspect, in *connection* with the *incarnation* of the Son. The fine flour was "*mingled*" with oil, and there was oil "*poured*" upon it. Such was the type; and in the Antitype, we see the blessed Lord Jesus Christ first "*conceived*," and then "*anointed*," by the Holy Ghost. (294)

Just as oil is "ever and the known symbol" of the Spirit, *lamps* and *vessels* signify the man created by God. After God created man out of the dust of the ground, He set him in the garden before the fruit-bearing trees—the tree of life in particular. God gave this man no charge except to properly care for his eating (Gen. 2:7-9, 16-17). The tree of life signifies God in Christ as the Spirit to be life to man; it is the Triune God—the Father in the Son, and the Son as the Spirit. That man was to eat the tree of life signifies that he should receive God Himself into him to be his life and life supply. Thus, the beginning of the Scriptures presents the crucial revelation of God as life to man and man as a vessel, a container, for God. The Gospel of John tells us that "in Him was life," that He came that we may have life, and that by believing into Him we receive eternal life (1:4; 10:10; 3:15-16, 36); that is, we receive Christ Himself who is our life (Col. 3:4).

Concerning the apostle Paul, the Lord told Ananias, "Go, for this man is a chosen vessel to Me, to bear My name before both the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Paul spoke very clearly concerning man as a vessel for God in Romans 9:21-23, which says,

Or does not the potter have authority over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor? And what if God, wishing to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known, endured with much long-suffering vessels of wrath fitted for destruction, in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He had before prepared unto glory.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul says, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels." The Christ of glory is the priceless treasure in the frail vessels of humanity. In 2 Timothy 2:20 and 21, Paul further affirms and reiterates this concept:

But in a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels but also wooden and earthen; and some are unto

honor, and some unto dishonor. If therefore anyone cleanses himself from these, he will be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, useful to the master, prepared unto every good work.

Man is a vessel, whether a “gold” or “silver” vessel of mercy unto honor and glory or a “wooden” and “earthen” vessel of dishonor and wrath. That man as a vessel is a container for God as life is a crucial revelation in the Scriptures. Moreover, the Scriptures reveal that man, as a vessel for God, is tripartite. First Thessalonians 5:23 says, “And the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This word strongly indicates that man is of three parts: spirit, soul, and body.

The spirit (Zech. 12:1; Job 32:8) as our inmost part is our inner organ, possessing God-consciousness; it is the spiritual organ with which we contact God. It is in our spirit that we are regenerated, and it is in our spirit that the Holy Spirit dwells and works (John 3:6; Rom. 8:16). Moreover, it is in our spirit that we enjoy Christ and His grace, and Christ and the Spirit are with the believers in their regenerated human spirit (2 Tim. 4:22; Gal. 6:18). The spirit is different from the heart, soul, mind, emotion, will, and natural life. John 4:24 says that we worship God, who is Spirit, in our human spirit, and Romans 1:9 says that Paul served God in his regenerated spirit by the indwelling Christ, the life-giving Spirit, not in his soul by the power and ability of the soul.

The soul, on the other hand, is our very self; *soul*, or *soul-life* (ψυχή) in Matthew 16:26 is *himself* (ἑαυτόν) in Luke 9:25. The soul is a medium between our spirit and our body, possessing self-consciousness, that we may have our personality. Our being, our personality, is in our soul.

With the spirit we know God and our relation to Him and our relation morally to every created object. With our soul powers—the intellect, sensibilities (affections, emotions) and will—we are able to deal with the intuitions of the spirit, the claims of these various soul faculties and the record of the bodily senses. (McDonough 16-17)

Lastly, the body as our external part is the outer organ, possessing world-consciousness, that we may contact the material world. Hebrews 4:12 also speaks of the difference between the spirit and the soul. This verse says, “For the word of God is living and operative and sharper than any

two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow, and able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Luke 1:46-47 and 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 also contrast the spirit with the mind, the leading part of the soul.

Now we may apply the scriptural truth of man as a tripartite being to the parable of the virgins. This parable speaks firstly of the virgins’ lamps. Proverbs 20:27 says, “The spirit of man is the lamp of Jehovah, / Searching all the innermost parts of the inner being.” *Lamps* signify the spirit of the believers, which contains the Spirit of God as the oil. The believers shine forth the light of the Spirit of God from within their spirit. Thus, they become the light of the world and shine as a lamp in the darkness of this age (Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 2:15-16), bearing the testimony of the Lord for the glorification of God. Through regeneration, God as life first indwells man in his spirit (John 3:5-6). From there, He desires to dispense Himself and spread into every part of man, especially his soul, signified in Matthew 25 by the vessels.

After we have received the divine life, we must grow in the divine life with regeneration as the base. Therefore, God’s organic salvation continues with the renewing of our mind, which is the leading part of our soul.

The Process of Taking Oil in Our Vessels with Our Lamps

The central issue of the parable of the virgins is whether or not the virgins “took oil in their vessels with their lamps” (Matt. 25:4). As we have seen, *lamps* signify our human spirit, which is regenerated by the Spirit of God, while *vessels* primarily refers to man’s soul, the center of

his personality. This indicates that the prudent believers allow Christ to spread Himself as the life-giving Spirit from their spirit into their soul to saturate and transform their soul (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). This spreading of the Spirit in our inward being is a lifelong process, involving the organic salvation of God. The first step in God’s organic salvation is regeneration, in which the Spirit enters into our human spirit. In this way we are born of God and have, in addition to our natural life, the divine, eternal life of God to be the basis and means of our spiritual life and living (Titus 3:5; John 1:13; 3:3, 6). This is signified by oil in the lamps. All believers in the New Testament age have received “oil” in their “lamps.”

After we have received the divine life, however, we must not remain in the stage of regeneration. We must grow in the divine life with regeneration as the base. Therefore, God’s organic salvation continues with the renewing of our mind, which is the leading part of our soul. The renewing of the mind is the spreading of the Spirit into our mind. God renews us that we may become His divine,

new creation in practicality. Romans 12:2 tells us, “And do not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind.”

The renewing of the mind...is the base for the transformation of our soul. Our mind is the leading part of our soul, and as it is renewed, our will and emotion automatically follow to be renewed also. To be renewed means that a new element is wrought into our being. This produces an inward metabolic transformation. (Recovery Version, Rom. 12:2, note 4)

Similarly, Ephesians 4:23 says, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.” The spirit of our mind involves the regenerated spirit of the believers, which is mingled with the indwelling Spirit of God. As this mingled spirit spreads into our mind, it becomes the spirit of our mind.

In addition to renewing our mind, God also sanctifies us subjectively that we may have His holy nature. This subjective sanctification is in addition to the judicial, positional sanctification accomplished through the redeeming blood of Christ, as mentioned in Hebrews 13:12. It is organic and dispositional, and is carried out by the Holy Spirit, as spoken of in Romans 15:16, 6:19, and 22. As we are established in God’s organic salvation, the element of Christ’s resurrection life sanctifies us in our disposition so that our natural disposition, which is crooked, perverted, and full of peculiarities, is sanctified by God’s holy and divine nature, of which we have been made partakers (2 Pet. 1:4). Eventually, this dispositional sanctification spreads from our spirit to our soul and eventually into our body, so that our entire being is wholly sanctified (1 Thes. 5:23).

Through the processes of God’s organic salvation we are also transformed to have the divine image. Second Corinthians 3:18 says, “But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit.” Such a transformation is not through outward correction or adjustment but through the operation of the life of God in us by the addition of the element of the divine life of Christ into our entire being, causing us to have His life shape by His life power with His life essence. Such a transformation is carried out by the Lord Spirit, on the one hand, and by our having an unveiled face, on the other hand, by which we behold and reflect the Lord like a mirror to express Him. It is also carried out by our living and walking by the Spirit and walking according to the mingled spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25; Rom. 8:4) that the divine life of Christ may have the way to regulate us and transform us into the image of the Lord in glory.

Such a full participation in God’s economy to gain the ma-

turity in the divine life requires that we pay a price in our pursuit of the Lord. This is indicated in Matthew 25:9 by the phrase *go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves*. Having the filling of the Holy Spirit is at a cost, such as giving up the world, dealing with self, loving the Lord above all, and counting all things loss for Christ.

By the process of God’s organic salvation, we are shaped and conformed to the image of Christ, the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29), so that we manifest God in life, in nature, in inward thinking, and in outward expression. It is at the culmination of this process that not only our lamp (our regenerated human spirit) but our entire vessel—our soul, comprising our mind, emotion, and will—is filled, saturated, and permeated with the divine, renewing, sanctifying, transforming, and conforming Spirit as the oil. This is the process of Christ making His home in our heart, resulting in the increase and fullness of the unlimited Christ (Eph. 3:17; 1:23; John 3:30). It is when we are thus matured in the divine life that we arrive at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ to participate in God’s divinity in full (Eph. 4:13). It is at this point that we become a corporate meal offering to the Lord, the fine flour of divinely enriched humanity fully mingled with the oil of the divine Spirit. It is then also that we, the virgins, can go forth to meet the Lord in His coming to be His worthy counterpart for an eternal marriage. Thus, by their experience of God’s organic salvation, the prudent virgins are prepared with the extra portion of oil in their vessels before the end of their life, and it is they who will enter into the wedding feast with the Bridegroom at His glorious coming.

The Believers’ Passage through Death

Matthew 25:5 says, “And while the bridegroom delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.” Expositors of the parable of the virgins have interpreted drowsiness and sleep in several ways. One common school of thought is that these states indicate a forgetfulness, neglect, and certain falling away from grace on the part of all the virgins, the foolish irretrievably so, the wise to a lesser extent. In this regard, Matthew Henry says,

Too many good Christians, when they have been long in profession, grow remiss in their preparations for Christ’s second coming; they intermit their care, abate their zeal, their graces are not lively, nor their works found perfect before God; and though all *love* be not lost, yet the *first love* is left. (369)

It is surprising that this interpretation is so quickly accepted by many. Lenski aptly voices dissatisfaction with this line of thought:

The fathers interpreted the sleep as death, which is

unavoidable because of the Lord's delay. This is far better than the interpretation that even the godly become negligent and careless while looking for the Lord's coming. Such an interpretation would allow Jesus to condone a certain degree of carelessness in true believers; but this is contrary to all his instructions and warnings which call on us *never* to be unprepared. (965)

As Lenski points out, the ancients generally understood the virgins' sleep to be death. It is more consistent with the New Testament to say that *drowsy* signifies becoming sick, and *sleep* signifies death. In 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul said, "Because of this many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." Under the Lord's discipline, some of the unruly Corinthians were first weak physically, then sick, and then they died. As we demonstrated in the previous installment of this column, those who are in the Lord do not perish upon death. Rather, they "sleep the sleep of death" (Psa. 13:3). Jesus said of the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, "The girl has not died but is sleeping" (Matt. 9:24); concerning Lazarus He said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep" (John 11:11); and Paul told the Thessalonians that God would bring with Him "those who have fallen asleep through Jesus" (1 Thes. 4:14). Upon passing from this world, the believers go to Paradise, the pleasant part of Hades, to rest in the bosom of Abraham and await the Lord's return (Luke 23:43; 16:22).

The main objection raised to this latter, more consistent interpretation of sleep is that it implies that all believers will die prior to the Lord's coming. This incorrect implication derives from the interpretation of the number ten, the number of the virgins. Many expositors point out that ten signifies a complete unit, a whole contingency. The Ten Commandments, for example, express God's demand in full, and history tells us that wherever there were ten Jews a synagogue could be built. If ten virgins represent all the believers throughout church history, to interpret sleep as death certainly does not fit the machinery of this parable. The true significance of the number ten, however, is found by combining this parable with the Lord's charge for watchfulness and readiness in Matthew 24:40-41. As we have seen, the parables in the latter part of chapter twenty-four and the first two in chapter twenty-five form one group. Matthew 24:40-41 says, "At that time two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left." The parable of the virgins follows shortly upon this word, beginning, "At that

time the kingdom of the heavens will be likened to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom" (25:1). "At that time," that is, at the time of the coming of the Son of Man, two will be in the field or at the mill, and ten will have fallen asleep. The whole body of God's people, therefore, is signified by twelve, of which ten is the major part. Joseph's ten brothers, for example, were sent by Jacob into Egypt, while two, Joseph and Benjamin, remained apart (Gen. 42:3-4). Ten tribes rebelled against the house of David, while two tribes remained faithful (1 Kings 11:30-31). Two of the twelve apostles asked the Lord to seat them on His right and left hand, causing the other ten to become indignant (Matt. 20:24). At the time of the Lord's coming, the majority of the believers will have died. Only a small number, the remainder represented by the two men in the field or the two women grinding, will be alive. Therefore, the parable of the virgins in 25:1-13 is the completion of 24:40-41, showing the condition of all the believers "at that time," the time of the coming of the Son of Man.

Gaining maturity in the divine life
requires that we pay a price
in our pursuit of the Lord. Having
the filling of the Holy Spirit is at
a cost, such as giving up the
world, dealing with self, loving
the Lord above all, and counting
all things loss for Christ.

Matthew 25:6-7 continues, "But at midnight there was a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Go forth to meet him! Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their own lamps." *Midnight* signifies the darkest time of this dark age, that is, the end of this age when the Lord returns. Some expositors have said that the end of each believer's life is signified here. This interpretation does not compromise the meaning of the

parable; as long as we account for the period of rest and waiting in Paradise between the believer's death and the time of his resurrection at the Lord's coming, the two events follow in succession. The cry at midnight corresponds with the voice of the archangel, and *arose* signifies the resurrection from the dead. This is the resurrection predicted in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16, which says,

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so also those who have fallen asleep through Jesus, God will bring with Him. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are living, who are left remaining unto the coming of the Lord, shall by no means precede those who have fallen asleep; because the Lord Himself, with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

At the voice of the archangel, the virgins, those who have died throughout the course of this long age, will rise from the dead to meet the Lord.

A Judgment after Resurrection Based on Our Growth in Life

The process of God's organic salvation begins with our regeneration and continues throughout our entire lifetime. The Lord in His righteousness, however, demands that the inward work of His Spirit and our experience of His full salvation be completed in the course of our life in this age. Lenski says, "At the Parousia each of us will meet the Lord in the very condition in which we were when death removed us from this world. Foolish or wise, with or without oil, we shall appear when Jesus returns" (961-962). Thus, at the time of our passage into death, being removed from this world, the proper time allotted for our transformation will have come to a close. Then, after our resurrection, we will stand before the Lord with either a barely-lit lamp or with the extra portion of oil in our vessels with our lamps.

In Matthew 25:1 the virgins went forth to a meeting (ὑπάντησις) with the Lord, denoting a face-to-face meeting alone and in secret. In verse 6, however, the virgins are called to another kind of meeting (ἀπάντησις), an open meeting called according to plan and ceremony as the "official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary" (Vine 58). Throughout the course of a believer's life, he continually meets with the Lord inwardly to receive the addition of His divine life into his being for his transformation. Then, after his passage through death and subsequent resurrection, each believer will appear before the Lord to be evaluated with respect to the portion of transformation he experienced in his lifetime. If we would be those who love the Lord and who are waiting for His coming back, we need the infilling of the Spirit for the maturity of life. This infilling is signified by the extra portion of oil in the vessels.

The parable of the virgins reveals that when the Lord Jesus comes back and manifests His kingdom, all true, genuine Christians will be judged by Him at His judgment seat (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10). A differentiation will be made between those who allowed the Lord to grow in them unto maturity and those who did not. Those who paid the price to give the Lord the ground in their whole being will be found with the extra portion of oil in their vessel. But those who passed the entirety of their life living in the natural life of the soul, not yielding their whole being to the spreading of the Spirit within them, will be found without oil in their vessel. At that time their lamps will be going out. This does not mean that they have lost or will lose their salvation, for their lamps are not altogether extinguished. The door to which the foolish virgins are not admitted in Matthew 25:10 is not the door of eternal salvation but the door through which one enters into the enjoyment of the Lord's wedding feast as a reward for his growth in life. All ten virgins are

regenerated, for they all had oil in their lamps. Their lamps were lit with the oil of the Spirit, indicating that they were saved, but five did not have the extra portion of the oil in their vessels; that is, in addition to being regenerated in their spirit, they did not have the spreading of the Spirit in their soul through the process of God's organic salvation.

The remainder of the parable of the virgins in Matthew 25:8-13 says,

And the foolish said to the prudent, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out. But the prudent answered, saying, Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves. And as they were going away to buy, the bridegroom came; and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast. And the door was shut. And later the rest of the virgins came also, saying, Lord, lord, open to us! But he answered and said, Truly I say to you, I do not know you. Watch therefore, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

The plea of "give us some of your oil" in verse 8 implies that even after they are resurrected, the foolish believers will still need the filling of the Holy Spirit. No one, however, can obtain the filling of the Holy Spirit for others. For this reason all believers are required to "buy" the oil, as indicated in verse 9. If we do not pay the price to gain the filling of the Holy Spirit today, we will have to pay it after we are resurrected. While the prudent virgins will enjoy the wedding feast as a reward, the foolish virgins will be apart from the enjoyment and glory of the wedding feast.

Hebrews 12:5-10 clearly tells us that "whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." As those who pursue the Lord, we know the chastening of the Lord throughout our lifetime "for what is profitable that we might partake of His holiness." However, the Scriptures give us no assurance that there is no possibility of chastisement for the believers after their death and resurrection. Rather, if we believers pass into death before the Lord's coming, not having paid the price to be matured in His divine life, we will sleep in Christ in that condition of immaturity and unreadiness, and at the Lord's coming we will arise in resurrection still in immaturity and unreadiness. In such a condition we will still be required to buy the oil, to gain the fullness of the Spirit in our entire being, but we will be late in so doing. To the foolish virgins who were late in paying the price for the filling of the Holy Spirit, the Lord will say, "I do not know you" (Matt. 25:12). This indicates that the Lord will not recognize, not approve, the late-maturing believers for participation in His wedding feast in the coming millennial age. They will not lose their salvation, but they will miss this dispensational reward.

Nebulous Interpretations and Inherent Contradictions

The parable of the virgins has suffered many inadequate interpretations throughout the course of the believers' study of the Bible. We believe that what we have presented here is a fair and accurate interpretation, consistent with the truths of the entire Scriptures in the light of God's eternal economy. Many good expositors have begun a good work in dealing with this critical passage as a word of righteousness to the believers, but very few have finished the work in a consistent and thorough way. The result is a history of nebulous interpretations and inherent contradictions. The most glaring shortcoming is in how expositors have treated the persons and predicaments of the ten virgins. A number of great students of the Bible point out that all the virgins, both the prudent and the foolish ones, signify believers in various conditions, but very few adequately explain what it means that only the prudent ones have the extra portion of oil. Fewer still tell us what it means that the prudent virgins enter into the wedding feast, while the foolish ones, as true believers, are excluded. The following paragraphs should suffice to represent the obscure and contradictory nature of the prevailing understandings of this critical portion of prophecy.

The eminent Matthew Henry draws an unclear line between the prudent and foolish virgins in his commentary on this parable. The foolish virgins, he says, are hypocrites and mere professors of faith; the prudent ones are sincere Christians. However, of the former he says, "The lamps of hypocrites often go out in this life; when they who have begun in the spirit, end in the flesh" (370). How is it that mere professing, perishing hypocrites are those who have begun in the spirit, like the Galatians who were regenerated by receiving the Spirit but were distracted by the works of Judaism (Gal. 3:2-3)? These carnal hypocrites, Henry says, are not saved, for they will go to "heaven-gate" to demand entrance, but will be shut out and "thrust down to hell" (371). However, no one whose lamp was once lit, who began by the Spirit, can ever be thrust down to hell. Henry draws a practical inference as the conclusion of his commentary:

Our great duty is to watch, to attend to the business of our souls with the utmost diligence and circumspection....Every day and every hour we must be ready, and not off our watch any day in the year, or any hour in the day. Be thou *in the fear of the Lord* every day and *all the day long*. (372)

Henry does not tell us why we, the regenerated believers saved by grace through faith and assured of that salvation, must watch with circumspection. Does he see a danger that we will be thrust away from "heaven-gate"? Once we, by our act of believing, pass from the position of "carnal hypocrites" into that of genuine Christians (370), what further business of our souls must we attend to with fear, every day and every hour, in the light of the Lord's coming? Speaking in terms only of heaven and hell, Henry does not tell us what we must be ready for or what the way is to be ready. Clearly, Henry is representative of a great number of expositors who see in this parable a warning for watchfulness on the part of believers but cannot properly fit it into the simple dilemma of salvation versus perdition. This manner of exposition is nebulous and contains inherent contradictions. As we have seen, the great Brethren teacher J. N. Darby says that all the virgins are those who have come out "from the world, from Judaism, from everything, even religion connected with the world, to go and meet the coming Lord." He goes on, however, to categorize the virgins as the "professing church," comprised of "the faithful

who have the Spirit" and the unfaithful whose lamps, though once burning, have gone out (168-170). That those who come out "from everything" to meet the coming Lord may merely be professing Christians, and that those who once had the oil of the Spirit can later be found without Him leads to troubling ambiguities and contradictions concerning salvation and readiness for the Lord's appearing. The enlightened Dean

Alford points out that even the foolish virgins are "faithful souls," true believers. Their fault was that they, unlike the prudent virgins, did not give "*all diligence to make their calling and election sure*...trusting that the light, once burning, would ever burn," making "no provision for the strengthening of the inner man by watchfulness and prayer" (249). He recognizes that the improvident ones will miss the wedding feast, "*the marriage supper* of Rev. xix. 7-9," while they are gone to buy the oil (250-251), but he offers no insight as to the way in which the foolish believers are dealt with during the marriage supper. If this is not nebulous, it is at least incomplete.

Lenski tells us that the virgins in this parable represent "all the followers of Christ during all the ages" (963). However, he goes on to apply the sign of the five foolish virgins by saying, "Hundreds of people attach themselves to the church but are never reborn and renewed" (965). It is contradictory to say that a "follower of Christ" is not reborn. Because it is not clear from Lenski's exposition whether or not the foolish followers of Christ are genuine Christians,

If we pass into death
before the Lord's coming,
not having paid the price
to be matured in His divine life,
we will arise in resurrection
still in immaturity
and unreadiness
at the Lord's coming.

much of the power of the parable is lost. His conclusion to this parable is even more confusing:

We must constantly be watching. Our watching means that we must constantly look to ourselves, to be ever ready, to be ever rich in grace so that, when the day and the hour arrive, there may be no question as to our being received. (971)

We, Lenski says, must be ever ready and rich in grace. If not, he implies, we will not be received, approved, by the Lord at His coming. This warning seems commensurate with the purpose of the parable, but it is confused by his indication that the foolish virgins are not reborn. For Lenski, it seems that being reborn is the same as being “rich in grace,” and that not being reborn is the same as not being ready. Being reborn, however, is the result of our believing in the redemptive work of the Lord and receiving the regenerating Spirit. Being rich in grace is a matter that is conditioned upon our fellowship with the Lord. If being ready, as Lenski equates, is simply to be reborn, why must we “constantly look to ourselves” as to whether or not we are ready? Those who are reborn should have the complete assurance of that blessed fact. Lenski does not tell us why we, the reborn and regenerated believers, must constantly be watching. His thought is incomplete, and his conclusions are nebulous.

Finally, Lockyer tells us that this parable speaks of “the need of watchfulness on the part of believers as they await their Lord from heaven” (238). He seems to be clear at times that all the virgins represent regenerated believers, for none of them altogether lacked the oil. He says,

Absence of oil indicates the lack of salvation, a Christian profession without possession. All *ten* virgins had some oil, otherwise their lamps would not be spoken of as “going out.” The wisdom of five of them consisted in the provision in advance of a supply of oil necessary to replenish their lamps. (240)

The foolish, unprepared believers, he notes, will be excluded from the wedding feast of Christ. However, Lockyer does not finish this thought. Barraged by conflicting interpretations, he warns us not to be confused by seeking too many spiritual meanings in the details of this parable; rather, we should interpret it broadly. He concludes, “Amid conflicting interpretations of the parables our personal responsibility is to ‘Watch,’ for watching implies a constant supply of oil....The question for each heart to answer is, Will I be ready when the Bridegroom comes?” (241). Lockyer, like many expositors, feels that this parable must be a word of righteousness as a warning for the believers in the church age, but “amid conflicting interpretations” he overtly gives up hope in unveiling the details of this warning. This demonstrates the pattern of

nebulous interpretations and inherent contradictions in the common understandings of this parable.

Our future is the Lord’s coming back. We the believers are the virgins going out of the world to meet the coming Lord. For the majority of Christians, however, at the end of their pathway through the world has been a grave. If the Lord delays His coming, we too may pass through death to wait for the Lord’s coming. Therefore, in this age we all have an opportunity, by the process of renewing, sanctification, transformation, and conformation to the image of the Son of God, to gain an extra portion of the indwelling Spirit in our soul, in addition to what we received in our spirit at regeneration. Whether we are prudent or foolish virgins depends on whether or not we have this extra portion of the Spirit in our vessel. If we have the extra portion of oil, that is, if we are prepared, matured, possessed, and occupied by Christ, we will enter into the marriage feast as a reward of mutual enjoyment with the Lord as those believers who have been equipped with the fullness of the Holy Spirit before they die. Those who are not thus prepared will lose the reward of the marriage feast, but they still will be required to gain the maturing Spirit at a cost. As virgins before the Lord, we should be ready, always having oil in our vessel, always being filled with the Spirit of God in our whole being. We should not remain as babes. Rather, we must be brought on to maturity by cooperating with the Lord so that His organic salvation may be accomplished in us for the fulfillment of God’s eternal economy.

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