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Matthew 25:1-13 Exegetical Perspective

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Exegetical Perspective

The Gospel of Matthew presents a lucid and compelling portrait of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah for third-generation Christians. Having shown Jesus to be descended from David and Abraham (1:1), and fulfilling all righteousness (3:15), Matthew addresses followers of Jesus with such issues as the way of the kingdom (5:2-16), the order of the church (18:15-20), and the Great Commission (28:18-20). Along with John, Matthew was the great teaching Gospel of the early church, and it continues to be a favorite for discerning Christian living in every generation.

Emerging from the Christian movement centered in Jerusalem, and finalized in a Jewish setting such as Antioch (around 90 CE), Matthew's presentation of the fivefold teachings of Jesus matches the fivefold Law of Moses. Chapters 5-7 emphasize fulfilling the law by getting at its radical center; chapter 10 outlines Jesus' instructions to disciples as he sends them out on their traveling ministries; chapter 13 features parables of the kingdom regarding the reception and rejection of the gospel; chapter 18 calls for accountability and graciousness in managing community affairs; and chapters 24-25 call for followers of Jesus to be ready, faithful, and responsive as they await the return of the Son of Man.

As the first of three parables in Matthew 25, verses 1-13 present us with the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, emphasizing the importance of being ready for the bridegroom, as the hour of his appearing remains unknown. In contrast to the five foolish bridesmaids, who allow the oil in their lamps to run low, the wise bridesmaids keep their lamps full, so to be prepared for the unannounced appearing of the bridegroom. In Galilean culture, upon the bridegroom's appearance, the bridesmaids would accompany the wedding party with lamps and torches from the bride's house to that of the groom, where the celebration would then begin. This parable follows Jesus' apocalyptic teachings in the previous chapter (24:3-8) on signs of the end of the age, which will include persecutions (24:9-14), the desolating sacrilege in the temple, and false messiahs (24:15-28), before the appearance (*parousia*, 24:3, 27, 37, 39) of the Son of Man (24:29-31). Therefore, believers should be watchful, taking lessons from the budding fig tree, as one keeps guard against a thief in the night (24:32-44). As a laborer seeks to be found productively at work when his master shows up, the faithful and wise servant seeks to be diligent-serving his master well whenever he should return (24:45-51).

In contrast to these fear-producing warnings, anticipating the celebration of a wedding is far more joyous in its motivating thrust (vv. 1-13). As the high privilege of the bridesmaids is to welcome the groom (some mss. add "and the bride;" v. 1) and launch the celebration, they want to be ready for the groom's part of the wedding party, whenever it should arrive. Therefore, keeping their lamps filled and lit would have provided a joyous welcome and procession, whenever the unscheduled event should happen.

The foolish bridesmaids, however, have not prepared themselves for the wait. Perhaps they thought the bridegroom would come sooner, or perhaps they imagine being able to borrow oil from others. Their foolish lack of preparation, however, forces them to leave the scene to procure more oil, resulting in their missing out on the great joy of the wedding. As a result, the door is shut, and despite their excuses, the master of the feast declares he never knew them (vv. 11-12). The final point is made bluntly: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (v. 13).

As a collection parallel to the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), the final cluster of Jesus' sayings in Matthew (we might add chap. 23 to chaps. 24-25) emphasizes embracing the way of the kingdom and living by its standards, so that believers may be found ready and worthy before the returning Lord. Therefore, Matthew adds specificity to Mark's warnings against the scribes,

adding seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees (23:1 - 36; cf. Mark 12:38-40), condemning outward religiosity despite inward corruption and doing violence and injustice to the righteous and the needy. Matthew 5-7 and 23-25 are well read together as being mutually instructive.

Matthew 24- 25, then, builds upon the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus that Matthew finds in Mark 13, adding three emphases on watchfulness for the Lord's return: parallels with the flood of Noah, two men in the field, two women at the mill, and the householder's vigilance (24:37-44; cf. Luke 17:26-36; 12:39- 40); the parable of the Good and Wicked Servants (24:45- 51; cf. Luke 12:41-46); and the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. These parables expand upon the exhortation of Jesus in Mark 13:33-37 to watch and be ready for the return of the master.

So what does it mean to be ready and prepared for the Son's return? Luke's Jesus puts it bluntly: "I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). To be prepared for the returning master is to be found in living faithfully and full of faith. Faithful living involves embracing the countercultural standards of the Beatitudes as salt and light in the world (5:2- 16), living by the heart of the law instead of its legalistic fringe (5:17-37), breaking the spiral of violence by loving enemies and showing mercy (5:38-48), and practicing inward devotion over and against outward piety (6:1-18). The way of faith is characterized by trusting in God's provision-anxious for nothing (6:25-34), supplanting judgmentalism with graciousness (7:1 - 6), and trusting the Father fully for the provision of one's needs (7:7-11).

Only in faithful living and with living faith can one be prepared for the unannounced return of the bridegroom. Neither false messianic hopes, nor hostile demands of a persecuting world, nor apocalyptic signs in the heavens (24:2-36) should distract from the believer's central focus: being prepared for the wedding feast, and being suitably dressed for that wondrous celebration (vv. 1- 13; 22:1-14; cf. 1 Thess. 3:6- 13).

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