

SI: We're studying Jesus' kingdom parables, which he explains are the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven for believers.

In other words, these parables are about things we should understand and expect as we live in God's invisible kingdom in this world.

Spiritual principles and dynamics that are at work in the world.

INTRO: One year and one week ago, March 15, 2020, was our last in-person worship service before the pandemic lockdown.

People were starting to get nervous, there were stories about panic in some parts of the country, but things were calm in Cullman.

We had church that Sunday morning, and that evening, Allison and I drove over to Tuscumbia where the First Presbyterian Church was ordaining and installing a young assistant pastor in their evening service.

I was part of the Presbytery commission that was ordaining him.

We hung around talking to people afterwards so by the time we got back to Cullman it was around 9:00.

We remembered we were out of half and half for coffee in the morning, so we decided to dash into Walmart. Just one thing.

When we walked into the store it was full of people who were panic buying.

It took us aback, because we weren't expecting it.

We passed the bread aisle and the rice and pasta aisle, and the bottled water aisle and they were all noticeably depleted.

Then we reached the toilet paper aisle and everything was gone.

Even napkins and paper towels.

We quickly abandoned our plan to dash in and get a quart of half and half.

We grabbed a shopping cart and started throwing things in.

This morning I looked in our pantry and from our panic buying spree a year ago there is still a can of crushed pineapple and a can of collard greens.

Bread, water, toilet paper, canned goods, gold, ammunition, N-95 masks—

What should you stock up on for the end of the world?

Jesus says in this parable that the five wise virgins stocked up on lamp oil.

The five foolish virgins had lamps, but no oil.

And that made all the difference when the bridegroom appeared.

It made the difference between who got to go with him to the banquet

and who got shut out and refused entrance.
In a little bit we'll talk about what the oil symbolizes.

But first, let's look at the parable as a whole.
Jesus actually tells three parables in this chapter one right after the other.

The all have common themes.
They all present the return of the Lord as something sudden and unexpected.
His disciples wanted to know when.
Jesus told them that no one knows the day or the hour.
These parables all describe his sudden coming at an unexpected time.

They also all describe his coming as resulting in an unchangeable division between two groups of people. In this parable, between the wise and foolish virgins. In the next parable it's between those who invest their talents, those who don't. And in the last parable between the sheep and the goats. Before he comes, a person can move into the favorable category. But once he comes, the division is fixed forever.

And then the last common theme in these three parables is that the people who are lost when Christ returns and excluded from his blessing—they are all surprised at their rejection. But, Lord . . . they all say. So these parables are all about people in the church. People who know about Jesus and who think they are fine with Jesus, but find out in the end that they aren't.

Those are the common themes, but each parable has its own distinct emphasis. The emphasis of this parable is how hypocrites and genuine believers in Jesus Christ can look so much alike that it fools people. There are people in the church who appear in every way to be true followers of Christ. Everybody else thinks they are. They even think they are. They are fooling everyone, even themselves.

But Jesus is not fooled and one day he will reveal the difference.
So if you are a wise person, what this parable urges you to do is to live in the full knowledge of what will be revealed on the last day.

We'll study this parable under two points:

1. Most church folks look alike
2. But when Jesus comes, differences will be revealed

MP#1 Most church folks look alike

Ten virgins were invited to attend a wedding banquet.

The custom was that they accompanied the groom as he went to his in-laws' home to get his bride. And then they were to process with the bride and groom through the streets of their village to the couple's new home where the banquet was held. If the procession was at night, they would carry lamps or torches.

It turned out five were wise and five were foolish.

Five were ready for the groom and five were not.

These represent people who are ready for Jesus when he comes and are saved and those who are not ready for him and are lost.

But before the groom showed up, these young women looked very much alike.

The point is believers and hypocrites in the church often look alike.

We use the term hypocrite to refer to a person who is intentionally deceptive and insincere. But the Bible's use of the term is much more subtle and sobering.

A hypocrite is a person who sincerely thinks he is a fine Christian person.

He thinks he's right with God—but he's not.

He's not right with God because he has not been born again.

He does not have living faith in Christ.

He substitutes all sorts of other things for living faith in Christ and it is in those things that he puts his trust.

Preachers through the ages have made lists of the similarities the ten virgins shared and then applied those similarities to hypocrites in the church.

Let's list some of those similarities and ponder the spiritual significance.

1. All the virgins got invitations to the wedding.

In the church, everybody hears the Gospel and gets invited to join Jesus in heaven. Every Sunday everyone is invited to the feast.

Come and confess your sins to Jesus and be forgiven.

Come to and listen to God's word and believe him.

Come to the Lord's Table and commune with him.

Hypocrites are extended many, many invitations.

2. They all responded positively to the invitation.

In a different parable Jesus describes people in a town disregarding or scorning an invitation to a wedding feast, but not these virgins.

Hypocrites can respond positively to Jesus' invitation to the extent that they connect themselves to church, identify as Christians, participate in church life

3. They all had some affection for the groom.

The virgins were not indifferent participants. They all went out to see him.

They were moved emotionally by his coming.

Hypocrites in the church can be moved emotionally by Jesus and the Christian faith.
They can be moved to tears, moved to give generously.

4. They all called the groom “Lord.”

The version I read this morning has them saying Sir, Sir, open the door for us.

But it's the Greek word *kurie*, and most English versions translate it Lord.

It's like that passage in Matthew 7 where Jesus says that many will say on the day of judgment, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and perform miracles.

But he will say, Depart from me you workers of iniquity.

Hypocrites in the church call Jesus Lord just like believers do.

And it even goes deeper than that. They ask Jesus to let them into heaven.

They want to go to heaven. They think they are going there.

5. They all believed the bridegroom was coming.

Hypocrites can believe intellectually in the Second Coming of Christ—
and they can believe all sorts of other Christian doctrines.

They can be doctrinally precise and doctrinally correct.

6. They were all virgins.

This is not the parable of the five virgins and the five whores.

They had all ten lived and maintained morally upright lives.

Hypocrites in the church can be morally upright people—
at least in keeping the rules of outward morality.

Jesus almost never condemned the Pharisees for outwardly immoral acts.

He acknowledged that they kept the outside pretty clean.

He said the problem was their heart.

7. They all had lamps.

They were all equipped. What do the lamps represent.

You have to be careful assigning meaning to every little detail in parables—

but some commentators argued the lamps symbolize gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Is that really true?

Are even hypocrites sometimes equipped with gifts of the Holy Spirit? Yes.

They have natural talents and even special abilities for use in the church.

In the Old Testament, King Saul is an example.

He was not a born again man, but often the Holy Spirit gifted him to help Israel.

Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Christ preached and performed miracles.

Hebrews 6 talks about people in the church who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the world to come but are not born again.

Throughout church history there have been ministers and clergymen with gifts of

preaching and leadership but they have been personally unconverted. Hypocrites can have gifts that come from the Holy Spirit but at the same time have hearts unchanged by the power of the Holy Spirit.

8. Another similarity—they all fall asleep waiting.

Which I think shows that believers and hypocrites alike go through spiritual slumps. The difference being that for a believer it's an aberration. For the hypocrite it's a reflection of his real condition.

Besides these similarities in the parable we could add others. Hypocrites can feel conviction of sin. It's not a conviction that leads them to Jesus in a saving way, but they can still feel it deeply and see that it is wrong. They can also feel very confidently that they are saved. They are deluded when they feel saved. It's not true assurance, it's presumption. But they can say with great confidence they are sure they are going to heaven.

This doesn't mean that all hypocrites in the church look indistinguishable from regenerate believers. Sometimes they show their true colors and their unbelieving hearts reveal themselves. But it's possible for them to look very real. Paul says that it's even possible for someone to give away all his possessions and even give his body to be burned and have not charity—which is Paul's way of referring to the saving work of the Holy Spirit.

What's the purpose of this exercise?

It's not to condemn our fellow church members.

Look askance at their profession of faith or doubt their salvation when they fall. The purpose of this exercise so that each and every one of us understand that hypocrites and born again believers can look alike in many ways.

And then to turn the piercing light of Jesus' parable inward.

What about me? What about my own spiritual condition?

Am I prepared for Jesus' coming?

Paul says in 2 Cor. 13 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

Jesus didn't answer the disciples' question about his second coming.

He told them what they really needed to know—be wisely prepared because—and here we come to the second point . . .

MP#2 When Jesus comes, differences will be revealed.

So, what's the difference between the wise and foolish virgins?

We've seen all the similarities. What's the difference?
In the parable five of them took oil in jars along with their lamps and five did not.
They were invited to the wedding, given a role to play.
They came, dressed, enthusiastic—but did not make one essential preparation.
Jesus says that's the difference when he comes—some prepared, others not.

So what is it? What's the oil? What does it represent? Jesus doesn't say.
We have to look at the rest of Scripture and ask—

What's the one essential thing necessary to have when Jesus returns?
When this world as we know it ends, and the age to come dawns—
what must you have in order to enter the wedding banquet and join the feast?

Let me read to you what Charles Spurgeon said about the oil in one of his sermons
on this parable. Spurgeon was a great 19th century English preacher.

A great change has to be wrought in you, far beyond any power of yours to accomplish, ere you can go in with Christ to the marriage. You must, first of all, be renewed in your nature, or you will not be ready. You must be washed from your sins, or you will not be ready. You must be justified in Christ's righteousness, and you must put on his wedding dress, or else you will not be ready. You must be reconciled to God, you must be made like to God, or you will not be ready. Or, to come to the parable before us, you must have a lamp, and that lamp must be fed with heavenly oil, and it must continue to burn brightly, or else you will not be ready. No child of darkness can go into that place of light. You must be brought out of nature's darkness into God's marvelous light, or else you will never be ready to go in with Christ to the marriage, and to be forever with him.

So what's the oil? Spurgeon doesn't say directly the oil symbolizes this or that.
He says a great change must wrought in you.

You must be renewed in your nature, washed from your sins, justified by Christ's righteousness, reconciled to God, made to be like God, brought out of nature's darkness into God's marvelous light.

What's he talking about? Can you call it one thing?

He's talking about being born again, having a converted heart, regeneration.
Your thinking and affections and self-perception and loves must be changed by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

How does that life look different from the hypocrite?

I've told you before the story of William Haslam.

He was also a 19th century English preacher, not a Baptist like Spurgeon.

He was an Anglican minister,

He had been a minister for some time but was unconverted.

He was like one of the foolish virgins. He had an affection for Christianity.

He believed Christian doctrines. He was a moral man.

He was gifted as a preacher and pastor. He had a large, well-attended church. But he had no oil in his lamp—his heart had not been changed by the Holy Spirit.

On October 19, 1851 he was in his pulpit, preaching to a full sanctuary.

He wasn't preaching on this parable, but he was preaching on a similar passage.

It was that place in the Gospels where the Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.

You remember what Jesus said to them?

He said: It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

So Haslam was preaching away on this passage. He explained that the Pharisees were good men religiously speaking, they were moral, they knew the Scriptures, they believed the Scriptures, they were zealous for God.

But they were condemned because they failed to see the depth of their sin and because they did not personally turn in faith and trust to Jesus Christ to save them from their sins.

And as William Haslam preached he realized for the first time that he did not really trust Christ either. And as he continued with his sermon he saw the truth more and more clearly—himself a sinner and Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Here's what happened next. He tells it in his autobiography.

"I do not remember all I said, but I felt a wonderful light and joy coming into my soul. Whether it was something in my words, or my manner, or my look, I know not; but all of a sudden a local preacher, who happened to be in the congregation stood up, and putting up his arms, shouted out, 'the parson's converted! The parson's converted! Hallelujah!' and in another moment his voice was lost in the shouts and praises of three or four hundred of the congregation."

His coming to Christ occurred at the moment he realized he thought like a Pharisee.

Or, we could say, the moment he realized he was one of the foolish virgins.

But who brought about that change in his self-perception?

The Holy Spirit did.

William Haslam was locked in the darkness of his own satisfied and moral

hypocrisy. He did not reason his way to Jesus. The Holy Spirit changed him.

If the Holy Spirit had not illuminated his mind with God's word that morning,

Haslam would have preached a fine sermon on the Pharisees and thought he

was fine too, but at Christ's return he would have found himself shut out.

Unless the Holy Spirit works in your heart, and convinces you of your need for Jesus and enables you to turn to him in faith—you won't.

So if it's his supernatural work, then what does it mean when Jesus tells you to be ready for his return, tells you to be wisely prepared?

How do you prepare if it's not your work but the Spirit's?

And an even more troubling question ;

How do you know you aren't self-deceived?

If you had asked the five foolish virgins earlier in the day if they were going to the wedding feast, they all would have all said yes with conviction.

If you had asked William Haslam before he got up to preach if he was right with God and going to heaven, he would have said—Of course.

Here's the answer: Ask God.

Ask him to search you.

Ask him to search your heart and to reveal to you where you have put your trust.

Ask him if you are trusting in Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness and life.

Ask him to reveal to you your true spiritual condition.

Then listen. The Holy Spirit will speak to you.

Not in an audible voice.

He will impress upon your spirit

a conviction of your need for Jesus or an assurance that you belong to him.

And then you need to follow his leading.

Do that today. Don't fall asleep like the foolish virgins and think you're fine.

There will be no second chances when Jesus returns.

For those without oil, the door will be shut, and they will not enter the feast no matter how much regret they feel.

Ask God today. Ask the Holy Spirit to tell you if you are wise or foolish, prepared or unprepared to meet Jesus when he comes.