

Watch and Work

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Introduction.

- A. It's not particularly hard to read the Bible and figure out what man must do to be saved, and then to go through those steps once we figure out what they are. The only thing that's hard to understand about the process is why so many people have such trouble seeing what God wants them to do.
- B. Once the new Christian begins his walk in newness of life, however, things get a lot more complicated. If we took all the passages about salvation and collected them together, they probably wouldn't fill up more than a few sheets of letter-sized paper. The things that instruct God's children in what they are to think and do AFTER baptism, however, make up the rest of the New Testament. Even the dedicated child of God will not fully grasp everything God wants him to do and then succeed in putting it all into practice before he dies.
- C. Thankfully, we don't have to have all of these nuances figured out right after we're baptized. However, God does want us to devote ourselves to understanding the truths of His word. One of the best ways to do this is to figure out what the basic, core principles of Christianity are and then try to figure out everything else in relation to that core. The Bible itself is often structured in this way, and the teachings of Jesus are especially useful in helping us figure out the essence of Christianity. Jesus often conveys this profound information to us in simple form, through the use of parables. The first part of Matthew 25 contains two such parables, and this morning, let's look at how these parables teach us two important things: to watch and work.

I. The Parable of the Ten Virgins.

- A. The first of these two parables, is commonly called the Parable of the **TEN VIRGINS**. It begins in 25:1-4. Jesus describes ten virgins who are waiting for a bridegroom to come to his wedding. Each virgin has an oil lamp—basically a bottle with a wick in it—to light the bridegroom's way. Five of the virgins were wise and brought extra oil in another vessel with them—sort of like us bringing extra batteries for a flashlight. The other five virgins were foolish and brought nothing with them. Underneath the story, this parable is really about the kingdom of heaven, about us and our relationship with God. Jesus is the bridegroom of the parable, and we are the virgins who are waiting for his return.
- B. That's not hard to figure out, but what's the deal with the lamps? Basically, in this parable, the lamps and the oil signify our commitment to being ready when Jesus comes. It's not hard for us to be committed when we come out of the water. I've never yet met a new Christian who wasn't thrilled about being baptized, and that initial burst of commitment is the oil in the lamps themselves. Every Christian has it.
- C. What every Christian doesn't have, though, is the extra oil—the extra commitment that will keep them going after that first burst of excitement has failed. It's something that every one of us needs if we want to go to heaven. In the parable, the wise virgins brought the extra oil with them. In our lives, we get the reserve of commitment that we need by doing the things that build us up, and one of the most important of these things is coming to services not just once a week or every couple of weeks, but whenever we have the chance.
- D. Every so often, somebody will ask me, "How often do I have to go to services?" or "Do I have to go to church on Wednesday night?" That's like asking, "If I'm going to cross Death Valley on foot, what is the least amount of water I can get away with carrying?" It is the opposite of the question we should be asking. The question we should be asking is "How can I make it to as many services as possible to get the greatest benefit?"
- E. In my life as a Christian, I've been saddened to see a number of Christians fall away. Sometimes, those Christians are regular three-times-a-week attendees who just fall off the spiritual cliff. Sometimes, that's true, but it's not usual. In my experience, almost all of the Christians who become unfaithful are the ones who try to see how little time in the assembly they can get away with. It's the Christians who try to cross Death Valley with the canteen instead of the tanker truck. Because they aren't getting the spiritual support they need, they gradually become weaker and weaker, until finally, they become spiritually dead. Let's not let that happen to us, friends. Let's be people who get our oil lamps refilled by coming to services.
- F. Now that we understand what everything stands for, we can look at **THE PROBLEM** in this parable, in Matthew 25:5-9. Basically, the problem is that the bridegroom doesn't show up when expected, and the foolish virgins who didn't bring extra oil start running out. Once again, this is something that we need to pay attention to. It warns us that if we don't find a way to renew our commitment to God, then our faith is going to start flickering. Just about every Christian who has ever been saved remains faithful for the first five minutes after his conversion. That's not the problem. The problem is what happens in five years, or twenty-five years. We don't know when the Lord will return, but we do know that He expects us to be faithful until death, and for folks who are baptized in their teens, that can be a very long time. We need to look ahead and realize that we may have to remain faithful for years and years, and that if we don't prepare ourselves for a lifetime of serving Jesus, then the odds are that our lamps will run out of fuel first.

- G. It's also interesting in this section to note what the foolish virgins do when they realize that they're running out of oil. They start asking the wise virgins for some. Just like this, some Christians get the idea from somewhere that they don't have to see to their own spiritual nourishment, that it's just the responsibility of the elders and the preacher to force-feed them. As a result, they won't work out their own salvation. Now, I'm here to tell you, folks—these elders are dedicated to helping all of us get to heaven, but they can only help. They can't make any of us be faithful if we don't make that commitment ourselves. Our salvation is up to us.
- H. Finally, though, we see the resolution of this parable when **THE BRIDEGROOM** appears in Matthew 25:10-13. He finally arrives, the wise virgins are there to greet him, they go into the house together, and he refuses to admit the foolish virgins who returned late. This should tell us, friends, that in our lives, there will either be a time when we return to Jesus or when He returns to us, and we need to be ready for that time whenever it occurs. It might be comforting for us to believe that if we are unfaithful to Him in that time, that He will look back to a time in the past when we were faithful and consider that. Sadly, that's not the case. Jesus expects us to always stand ready to see Him, to always be committed to His service, and if we aren't, He will reject us.

II. The Parable of the Talents.

- A. The companion parable to the Parable of the Ten Virgins is commonly called the Parable of the Talents, and it begins with the story of **THREE SERVANTS**. We see this introduction in Matthew 25:14-18. Essentially, a man prepares to go on a journey by distributing some of his wealth to three of his servants to use as they see fit. In our lives, we ordinarily think of a talent as some ability that a person has, but that's not the way the word was used in the first century. Back then, a talent was a measure of weight equal to how much a man was capable of carrying. In our terms, it was about 87 pounds. If these were talents of gold or silver, then, each talent represented 87 pounds of gold or silver, which is A LOT of money. In the parable, though, Jesus isn't describing the money God gives us. He IS talking about our abilities and opportunities. Just like in the parable, every Christian has these abilities in differing amounts. However, in the parable, there aren't any no-talent servants, and in the Lord's church, there aren't any no-talent Christians. God might not have given us as much ability as someone else, but all of us have something we can do in the Lord's work.
- B. However, despite the fact that all of these servants had been entrusted with a job to do by their master, not all of them carried this out in the same way. The servants who had been given five and two talents, respectively, both went out, traded, and doubled their original stake. By contrast, the servant who had been given one talent went out and buried his talent in a hole. Sadly, we can easily identify these two kinds of Christians in the church of today. Some Christians understand that God expects them to do something with what they've been given, and they go out and work. On the other hand, some Christians take their gifts and abilities from God and do nothing. They don't fall away, which I suppose would be the equivalent of taking the talent and heading to Timbuktu, but they don't do anything either. They can't point to accomplishments in their spiritual lives. They can't honestly say "I'm working for the Lord." They're one-talent Christians.
- C. We see the way the master responds to **THE FAITHFUL** servants in Matthew 25:19-23. He sees what they have done, he recognizes that they have worked for him, and he praises them accordingly. In my study of this parable, I've always wondered why there had to be two faithful servants, not just one. I think the reason is that we're meant to compare the two faithful servants to each other as well as to the unfaithful servant. The five-talent servant earned five more talents, and that was fine, because he was a five-talent servant. The two-talent servant only generated 40 percent as much profit as the five-talent servant, but that was fine too, because he'd only been given 40 percent as much. This is important because no two people in this room—not even the twins—have the exactly the same amount of ability to serve God. That means that we don't have to produce as much as each other. We just have to produce according to what God has given us. The two-talent folks in this room aren't supposed to show up on the day of judgment with five talents of work for the Lord, but do you know who is? The five-talent folks. We need to consider ourselves and act accordingly.
- D. By contrast, though, we have to be careful not to order our lives on the pattern of **THE UNFAITHFUL** servant. We read about the response he got in Matthew 25:24-30. Interestingly enough, just like the foolish virgins we looked at, the one-talent servant tries to shift the blame for his lack of production. He essentially tells the master that it's HIS fault because he's a hard man and demands so much, so the slave was too scared to do anything. Sadly, sometimes we see Christians fall into this same trap. They read the Bible, they let Satan convince them that the work God wants is too hard to do, and so they do nothing and indirectly blame their do-nothing-ness on God being a hard master. Folks, as my mother would say, that's a bunch of baloney. We have not been given a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. With God's help each one of us is capable of doing what God expects, and we can all use our gifts powerfully in His service.
- E. If we refuse to hear this warning and don't work, this parable warns quite plainly what will happen. Just like the master rejected his servant, God will reject us. We can't just keep ourselves out of trouble and hope that will be a ticket to heaven. We're called servants for a reason. We need to serve.

Conclusion. If you haven't been faithfully serving God, now's the time to start.