**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**26. THE TEN VIRGINS**

*"Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. Those who were foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold! The bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'What if there isn't enough for us and you? You go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' While they went away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Most certainly I tell you, I don't know you.' Watch therefore, for you don't know the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."*

*Matthew 25:1-13*

CHAPTERS twenty-four and twenty-five constitute one great whole in the teaching of our Lord, occasioned by a prediction that He had made about the destruction of the Temple, and the question then raised by His disciples, as the result of that prediction. This unbroken discourse of Jesus was uttered, not to the promiscuous crowds, but to His own disciples.

It is impossible to take this parable, or the one immediately following this, without a consciousness of the whole discourse. Our Lord was illustrating great truths in the realm of His predictive discourse, delivered to His own disciples, on Olivet.

The first word of this chapter is important, "Then." There was no break in His discourse. What He now said in this parable followed immediately upon what He had been saying before, when He had used the illustration of the householder, and the wise and faithful servant therein, and those who were unwise and unfaithful in the household. He had ended that illustration by saying those unfaithful and unwise were to have their portion appointed with the hypocrites, "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." "Then shall the Kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins." He was referring to that time, already referred to in the previous chapter, and the parabolic illustrations of the householder and the servants when the lord comes. "Then shall the Kingdom of heaven be likened unto." In that little word "Then" is the key to the interpretation. When will the Kingdom of heaven be like this? Not to-day. This parable of the ten virgins is often used as an evangelistic message. Evangelistic values may be deduced from it, but our Lord was not referring to this period, but to the consummation of the period, the time when the Lord shall come.

His discourse included the parabolic illustration of the householder and servants, and this parable of the virgins, and that which immediately and consecutively follows. There was no break. Again we have the word "For" at verse fourteen. The three parables followed each other, all belonging to the consummation of the age; intended for His own, not for the world outside. In every case there is an absent lord; but in each case the absent lord returns, and it is with this return of the absent lord these parables deal. They reveal certain aspects of the responsibilities of His own while the Lord is absent, in the light of what will transpire when the Lord returns. The parable of the household, the lord absent, his servants left in charge; the parable of the lord as bridegroom absent, certain people left there to wait for him; and the parable of the absent lord, having bestowed talents upon his own, and their response.

A threefold responsibility is revealed in the three parables. They link and merge in revelation. The first parable dealt with communal responsibility, within the circle of His own, concerning their behaviour towards each other. The whole Church is seen there. The second, that of the ten virgins, is still responsibility, but it is the responsibility of individual life that is manifest here. In the next parable, that of the talents, we shall see the responsibility of the Church with regard to imperial matters, the empire of Jesus, and trading for Him in His absence. First, how we should behave inside, communal responsibility - the parable of the householder. Then personal responsibility, what our attitude should be in the presence of the absence of the Lord, and the expectation of His return - the parable of the virgins. Then the imperial responsibility, as He has entrusted to us certain things for which we are responsible - the parable of the talents.

"Then," when the Lord shall come to deal with His people concerning their communal responsibility, as was revealed at the end of the previous chapter, "Then shall the Kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins." What was the subject which our Lord was illustrating? He was looking on to the consummation of the age, created by the coming of the Bridegroom. The parable is a figure of the bride and bridegroom. He is showing here the relation to that consummation of those whose duty is that of being prepared for it. The emphasis here is not on service. The symbols are not those of service, but of life. Everything leads up to that final injunction, "Watch." He has shown what our responsibility is towards each other, that there is to be a love-mastered community. Now, coming closer to the individual application, He takes this parable.

The figure employed is very simple, and Eastern. This Eastern scene was commonplace. Everyone who heard Him would understand it. Moreover we must not strain it in exposition. There is no mention of the bride in this story. That may give some pause. It is interesting how many people have tried to find the bride in the story, and have said that the wise virgins were the bride. There may be an element of truth in it. But the figure here is not of the bride, but of the bridegroom. Such an undoubted scholar as Trench, and others, interpret this whole parable as referring to the homecoming of the bridegroom with his bride. Generally, however, it is interpreted as the bridegroom coming for His bride, and that certainly harmonizes with other Scriptures. In that sense it may be said that the five wise virgins represent the true bride of Christ. The figure represents those who waited for the bridegroom when he comes.

We need not go into the particulars of the Eastern picture, because it is so simple and familiar. The Bridegroom is away, and whether He is coming for His people or with His bride at the moment is not important. There are those who were expected to be waiting for Him, for His coming. These are represented by these virgins. They were all waiting for His coming, they were all expecting Him. They all had lamps, and at a certain moment they all trimmed their lamps. Here is a picture of the light of that period, fed with oil, needing to have the wick constantly trimmed. That is the figure.

As they waited, "they all slumbered and slept," which does not suggest negligence on their part. It is natural and right. It is rather interesting that "slumbered and slept " would be better interpreted if put in another way, they nodded, and went right off! That is precisely what this means. They were waiting. It was night. They were waiting for the bridegroom, not knowing when he was coming; and necessarily and properly, they got drowsy, and they all went to sleep.

Then came the cry that told them the event for which they had waited was at hand. "Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him." Then we see that five of them heard the cry, awoke, trimmed their lamps, adjusted the wicks to find their own flame, and they had no oil. Five of them did exactly the same, but in their case there was oil, and the flame shone out in the darkness. Then those who lacked oil turned to those who had it, and said, "Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out." No, they could not do that. This has been criticized. A good preacher some while ago said the good virgins were a selfish crowd when they said they dare not share their oil. But they were quite right. If they shared their oil they also would be without light. The oil is individual in the case of those burning torches, and cannot be shared. The foolish virgins had to go and find oil, and they went; but it was too late. Those that were ready had entered in, and the door was shut.

What is this picture? Bear in mind that which we have seen already, but which needs emphasizing. It is a picture of the consummation. It is one phase of truth, the hour when the absent Lord returns. The absent Lord is coming back, when men render an account of stewardship. That is seen in the next parable; but here the absent Lord is coming back, and at His coming there will be the revelation of truth concerning those who have supposedly been His own during the period of His absence. The whole Church is here revealed. Yet I would amend that, and rather say it is a picture of Christendom. A very clear distinction should be drawn between the Church of God and Christendom. The Church of God consists of those who have the oil, and whose lights are burning, and who are ready when the Lord comes. Christendom is bigger than that. Here is a picture of the consummation, and the whole of Christendom is in it. Note carefully what we have already seen. There are similarities between the five foolish and five wise virgins, and they are remarkable similarities. They all expected Him. Apparent expectation on the part of the foolish, apparent expectation also on the part of the wise. Of both the foolish and the wise it is said, "They went forth to meet the bridegroom." But of the foolish it is said, "They took no oil." There had been evident carelessness. Of the wise it is said, they "took oil." There had been reality in their attitudes.

Yet there is this tremendous difference. Some had no oil. Others had the oil burning, and what is the appalling verdict at the end? The voice of Jesus saying to those who had lamps, who had expectation, but who had taken up only apparently and outwardly, a form of relationship to the absent Bridegroom, "I know you not." Then those who had the oil went in to the marriage feast - a picture of the sifting of Christendom at the conclusion of the age; an hour when profession, with all its symbols and ritual, devoid of oil and light and power, will have no avail; an hour when if there have been similar provision, and similar symbols, plus the oil that keeps the flame burning, these will be the password, and the passport to the marriage feast.

Everything culminates in that final word of Jesus, in the thirteenth verse, "Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour." What then? "Watch." What does it mean by watching? Does it mean that we are for evermore to be talking about the coming of the Bridegroom, and affirming our conviction that He is coming? No, the ten did that. What then is it to watch? We must have that mystic oil that creates a flame and a light.

When we begin to interpret that parable we find once more many suggestions. So great a father of the Church as Origen said their oil consisted of good works. In my judgment that was a breakdown in explanation. Martin Luther said that the oil consisted in faith, living faith. But was not Grotius right when he said that the oil is the symbol of the Holy Spirit? I think that is so. Through the Old Testament oil is ever the symbol of the Holy Spirit. Whether in the lamp burning in the Holy Place, or whether in the symbolism of such an one as Zechariah; whether in all those anointings of the ancient ritual, the oil was always typical of the Spirit and of power. Our Lord surely used this whole parable in that connection, and for that purpose.

The great word is "Watch." The interpretation of the watching is having the oil supplied. In the supply of the Spirit of God, and the life yielded to that Spirit, and dominated by that Spirit, there is always the oil which provides the light. Yes, Origen and Luther were partly right in a secondary sense, for where the oil is, there is the Spirit of God, there is living faith, and where there is living faith there are living works. But the great necessity is that oil that burns.

"Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!" When? The moment we ask When, we are in danger. "Ye know not the day nor the hour." It may be before this day closes He will put His pierced hand on all these furious world powers, and end them. He is coming to do that. It may be a thousand years, but a thousand years are only measurements of man, and are not in the economy of God. We do not know the hour.

What then are we to do? To see to it our lamps are burning, to see to it that we have the supply of that oil apart from which there is no shining of the light, no flaming light. So the parable of the virgins stands there in the midst of a triptych of parables, showing not communal responsibilities, not responsibility to my brother; not the responsibility for the Master's business in the world; but our responsibility, my responsibility about myself, about my own life. It is no use my coming to you, and asking you to let me have part of your oil. You cannot do it. This is personal and individual. There must be that fulness of the Spirit of God in individual life, which produces the shining of the light, and the burning of the flame. But at the end there will be division, and the Church and the Bridegroom will be revealed, while those who have had lamps, and attitudes, and expectations intellectually, but have made no living response, to them He will say, "I know you not."