

The Virgins

from *Papers on the Lord's Coming* by C. H. Mackintosh

We now approach that solemn section of our Lord's discourse in which He presents the kingdom of heaven under the similitude of "Ten Virgins." The instruction contained in this most weighty and interesting parable is of wider application than that of the servant to which we have already referred, inasmuch as it takes in the whole range of Christian profession, and is not confined to ministry either within the house or outside. It bears directly and pointedly upon Christian profession, whether true or false.

"Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom." (Matt. 25:1). Some have considered that this parable refers to the Jewish remnant; but it does not seem that this idea is borne out, either by the context in which this parable occurs or by the terms in which it is couched.

As to the entire context, the more closely we examine it the more clearly we shall see that the Jewish portion of the discourse ends with chapter 24:44. This is so distinct as not to admit of a question. Equally distinct is the Christian portion, extending, as we have seen, from chapter 24:45 to chapter 25:30; while from 25:31 to the end, we have the Gentiles. Thus the order and fulness of this marvellous discourse must strike any thoughtful reader. It presents the Jew, the Christian, and the Gentile, each on his own distinct ground, and according to his own distinctive principles. There is no merging of one thing in another, no confounding of things that differ. In a word, the order, the fulness, and the comprehensiveness of this profound discourse are divine, and fill the soul "with wonder, love, and praise." We rise from the study of it, as a whole, with those words of the apostle upon our lips, "O, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out."

And then, when we examine the precise terms made use of by our Lord in the parable of the ten virgins we must see that it applies not to Jews but to Christian professors—it applies to us—it utters a voice, and teaches a solemn lesson to the writer and the reader of these lines.

Let us apply our hearts thereto.

"Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom." (Matt.

25:1).

Primitive Christianity was especially characterized by the fact here indicated, namely, a going forth to meet a returning and an expected bridegroom. The early Christians were led to detach themselves from present things, and go forth, in the spirit of their minds, and in the affections of their hearts, to meet the Saviour whom they loved, and for whom they waited. It was not, of course, a question of going forth from one place to another; it was not local, but moral, and spiritual. It was the outgoing of the heart after a beloved Saviour whose return was eagerly looked for day by day.

It is impossible to read the epistles to the various churches and not see that the hope of the Lord's sure and speedy return governed the hearts of the Lord's dear people in early days. "They waited for the Son from heaven." They knew He was to come and take them away, to be with Himself forever; and the knowledge and power of this hope had the effect of detaching their hearts from present things. Their bright, heavenly hope caused them to sit loose to the things of earth. "They looked for the Saviour." They believed that He might come at any moment, and hence the concerns of this life were just to be taken up and attended to for the moment—properly, thoroughly attended to, no doubt—but only, as it were, on the very tip-toe of expectation.

All this is conveyed to our hearts, briefly but clearly, by the expression, "They went forth to meet the bridegroom." This could not be intelligently applied to the Jewish remnant, inasmuch as they will not go forth to meet their Messiah, but, on the contrary, they will remain in their position and amid their circumstances until He come and plant His foot on the mount of Olives. They will not look for the Lord to come and take them away from this earth to be with Him in heaven; but He will come to bring deliverance to them in their own land, and make them happy there under His own peaceful and blessed reign during the millennial age.

But the call to Christians was to "go forth." They are supposed to be always on the move; not settling down on the earth, but going out in earnest and holy aspirations after that heavenly glory to which they are called, and after the heavenly Bridegroom to whom they are espoused, and for whose speedy advent they are taught to wait.

Such is the true, the divine, the normal idea of the Christian's attitude and state. And this lovely idea was marvellously realized and practically carried out by the primitive Christians. But alas! alas! we are reminded of the fact that we have to do with the spurious as well as

the true in Christendom. There are "tares" as well as "wheat" in the kingdom of heaven; and thus we read of these ten virgins, that "five of them were wise, and five were foolish." There are the true and the false, the genuine and the counterfeit, the real and the hollow, in professing Christianity.

Yes, and this is to continue unto the time of the end, until the Bridegroom come. The tares are not converted into wheat, nor are the foolish virgins converted into wise ones. No, never. The tares will be burnt and the foolish virgins shut out. So far from a gradual improvement by the means now in operation—the preaching of the gospel and the various beneficent agencies which are brought to bear upon the world—we find, from all the parables, and from the teaching of the entire New Testament, that the kingdom of heaven presents a most deplorable admixture of evil; a corrupting process; a grievous tampering with the work of God, on the part of the enemy; a positive progress of evil in principle, in profession, and in practice.

And all this goes on to the end. There are foolish virgins found when the Bridegroom appears. Whence come they if all are to be converted before the Lord comes? If all are to be brought to the knowledge of the Lord by the means now in operation, then how comes it to pass that when the Bridegroom comes, there are quite as many foolish as wise?

But it will perhaps be said that this is but a parable, a figure. Granted; but a figure of what? Not surely of a whole world converted. To assert this would be to offer a grievous insult to the holy volume, and to treat our Lord's solemn teaching in a manner in which we would not dare to treat the teaching of a fellow mortal.

No, reader, the parable of the ten virgins teaches, beyond all question, that when the Bridegroom comes, there will be foolish virgins on the scene, and, clearly, if there are foolish virgins, all cannot have been previously converted. A child can understand this. We cannot see how it is possible, in the face of even this one parable, to maintain the theory of a world converted before the coming of the Bridegroom.

But let us look a little closely at these foolish virgins. Their history is full of admonition for all Christian professors. It is very brief, but awfully comprehensive. "They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them." There is the outward profession, but no inward reality—no spiritual life—no unction—no vital link with the source of eternal life—no union with Christ. There is nothing but the lamp of profession, and the dry wick of a nominal, notional, head belief.

This is peculiarly solemn. It bears down with tremendous weight upon

that vast mass of baptized profession which surrounds us, at the present moment, in which there is so much of outward semblance, but so little of inward reality. All profess to be Christians. The lamp of profession may be seen in every hand; but ah! how few have the oil in their vessels, the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, the Holy Ghost dwelling in their hearts. Without this, all is utterly worthless and vain. There may be the very highest profession; there may be a most orthodox creed; one may be baptized; he may receive the Lord's supper; be a regularly enrolled and duly recognized member of a Christian community; be a Sunday-school teacher; an ordained minister of religion; one may be all this, and not have one spark of divine life, not one ray of heavenly light, not one link with the Christ of God.

Now there is something peculiarly awful in the thought of having just enough religion to deceive the heart, deaden the conscience, and ruin the soul—just enough religion to give a name to live while dead—enough to leave one without Christ, without God, and without hope in the world—enough to prop the soul up with a false confidence, and fill it with a false peace, until the Bridegroom come, and then the eyes are opened when it is too late.

Thus it is with the foolish virgins. They seem to be very like the wise ones. An ordinary observer might not be able to see any difference, for the time being. They all set out together. All have lamps. And, moreover, all turn aside to slumber and sleep, the wise as well as the foolish. All rouse up at the midnight cry, and trim their lamps. Thus far there is no apparent difference. The foolish virgins light their lamps—the lamp of profession lighted up with the dry wick of a lifeless, notional, nominal faith; alas! alas! a worthless—worse than worthless—thing, a fatal soul-destroying delusion.

But here the grand distinction—the broad line of demarcation—comes out with awful, yea, with appalling clearness. "The foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps [*are going out*]" (see margin). This proves that their lamps had been lighted; for had they not been lighted, they could not go out. But it was only a false, flickering, transient light. It was not fed from a divine source. It was the light of mere lip profession, fed by a head belief, lasting just long enough to deceive themselves and others, and going out at the very moment when they most needed it, leaving them in the dreadful darkness of eternal night.

"Our lamps are going out." Terrible discovery! "The Bridegroom is at hand, and our lamps are going out. Our hollow profession is being made manifest by the light of His coming. We thought we were all

right. We professed the same faith, had the same shaped lamp, the same kind of wick; but alas! we now find to our unspeakable horror, that we have been deceiving ourselves, that we lack the one thing needful, the spirit of life in Christ, the unction from the Holy One, the living link with the Bridegroom. Whatever shall we do? O ye wise virgins, take pity upon us, and share with us your oil. Do, do, for mercy's sake, give us a little, even one drop of that all-essential thing, that we may not perish forever."

Ah! it is all utterly vain. No one can give of his oil to another. Each has just enough for himself. Moreover, it can only be had from God Himself. A man can give *light*, but he cannot give *oil*. This latter is the gift of God alone. "The wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the Bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage; *and the door was shut.*" (Matt. 25:9, 10). It is of no use looking to Christian friends to help us or prop us up. No use in flying hither and thither for some one to lean upon—some holy man, or some eminent teacher—no use building upon our church, or our creed, or our sacraments. *We want oil.* We cannot do without it. Where are we to get it? Not from man, not from the church, not from the saints, not from the fathers. We must get it from God; and He, blessed be His name, gives freely. "The gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

But, mark, it is an individual thing. Each must have it for himself. No man can believe, or get life for another. Each must have to do with God for himself. The link which connects the soul with Christ is intensely individual. There is no such thing as second-hand faith. A man may teach us religion, or theology, or the letter of Scripture; but he cannot give us oil; he cannot give us faith; he cannot give us life. "It is the *gift* of God." Precious little word, "gift." It is like God. It is free as God's air; free as His sunlight; free as His refreshing dew-drops. But, we repeat, and with solemn emphasis, each one must get it for himself, and have it in himself. "None can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: that he should still live forever and not see corruption. For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth forever" (Psalm 49:7-9).

Reader, what sayest thou to these solemn realities? Art thou a wise or a foolish virgin? Hast thou gotten life in a risen and glorified Saviour. Art thou a mere professor of religion, content with the mere ordinary dead routine of church-going, having just sufficient religion to make thee respectable on earth, but not enough to link thee with heaven?

We earnestly beseech thee to think seriously of these things. Think of them now. Think how unspeakably dreadful it will be to find thy lamp of profession going out and leaving thee in obscure darkness—darkness that may be felt—the outer darkness of an everlasting night. How terrible to find the door shut behind that brilliant train which shall go in to the marriage; but shut in thy face! How agonizing the cry, "Lord, Lord, open unto us!" How withering, how crushing the response, "I know you not."

O, beloved friend, do give these weighty matters a place in thy heart now, while yet the door is open, and while yet the day of grace is lengthened out in God's marvellous long suffering. The moment is rapidly approaching in the which the door of mercy shall be closed against thee forever, when all hope shall be gone, and thy precious soul be plunged in black and eternal despair. May God's spirit rouse thee from thy fatal slumber, and give thee no rest until thou findest it in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and at His blessed feet in adoration and worship.

We must now draw this paper to a close; but, ere doing so, we shall just for a moment glance at the wise virgins. The great distinguishing feature which, according to the teaching of this parable, marks them off from the foolish virgins is that when starting at the first they "took oil in their vessels with their lamps." In other words, what distinguishes true believers from mere professors is that the former have in their hearts the grace of God's Holy Spirit; they have gotten the spirit of life in Christ Jesus; and the Holy Ghost dwelling in them as the seal, the earnest, the unction, and the witness. This grand and glorious fact characterizes now all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ—a stupendous, wondrous fact, most surely—an immense and ineffable privilege, which should ever bow our souls in holy adoration before our God and our Lord Jesus Christ, whose accomplished redemption has procured for us this great blessing.

But how sad to think that, notwithstanding this high and holy privilege, we should have to read, as in the words of our parable, "They all slumbered and slept!" All alike, wise as well as foolish, fell asleep. The Bridegroom tarried, and all, without exception, lost the freshness, fervor, and power of the hope of His coming, and fell fast asleep.

Such is the statement of our parable, and such is the solemn fact of the history. The whole professing body fell asleep. "That blessed hope" which shone so brightly on the horizon of the early Christians, very speedily waned and faded away; and as we scan the page of church history for eighteen centuries, from the Apostolic Fathers to the

opening of the current century, we look in vain for any intelligent reference to the church's specific hope—the personal return of the blessed Bridegroom. In fact, that hope was virtually lost to the Church; nay, more, it became almost a heresy to teach it. And even now, in these last days, there are hundreds of thousands of professed ministers of Christ who dare not preach or teach the coming of the Lord as it is taught in Scripture.

True it is, blessed be God, we notice a mighty change within the last half century. There has been a great awakening. God is, by His Holy Spirit, recalling His people to long-forgotten truths, and amongst the rest, to the glorious truth of the coming of the Bridegroom. Many are now seeing that the reason why the Bridegroom tarried was simply because God was long-suffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Precious reason!

But they are also seeing that, spite of this long-suffering, our Lord is at hand. Christ is coming. The midnight cry has gone forth, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him." May millions of voices re-echo the soul-stirring cry until it passes in its mighty moral power, from pole to pole, and from the river to the ends of the earth, rousing the whole Church to wait, as one man, for the glorious appearing of the blessed Bridegroom of our hearts.

Brethren beloved in the Lord, awake! awake! Let every soul be roused. Let us shake off the sloth and the slumber of worldly ease and self-indulgence—let us rise above the withering influence of religious formality and dull routine—let us fling aside the dogmas of false theology, and go forth, in the spirit of our minds and in the affections of our hearts, to meet our returning Bridegroom. May His own solemn words come with fresh power to our souls, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour." May the language of our hearts and our lives be, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

The dark stream of evil is flowing apace:
Awake, and be doing, ye children of grace,
Let's seek with compassion the souls that are lost,
Well knowing the price their redemption has cost.
While singing with rapture the Saviour's great love,
And waiting for Him to translate us above—
"It may be to-morrow, or even to-night"—
Let our loins be well girded, and lamps burning bright.