

Historic Commentary

(23rd Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 25:1-12 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 25](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Hilary of Poitiers](#): The whole story is about the great day of the Lord, when those things concealed from the human mind will be revealed through our understanding of divine judgment. Then the faith true to the Lord's coming will win the just reward for unwavering hope. For in the five wise and five foolish virgins, a complete separation between the faithful and unfaithful is established. Similarly, Moses had received the Ten Commandments written on two tablets. For it was necessary that all these things be written on each. The double column represented, under a single testament, the division between the good and the bad, between the designation of right and left.

[Augustine](#): So then let us understand, dearly beloved, that this parable relates to us all, that is, to the whole church together, not to the clergy only, of whom we spoke yesterday, nor to the laity only but generally to all. Why then are the virgins five and five? These five and five virgins are all Christian souls together. But that I may tell you what by the Lord's inspiration I think, it is not souls of every sort but such souls as have the catholic faith and seem to have good works in the church of God. Yet even of them it is said, "Five are wise, and five are foolish."

[Hilary of Poitiers](#): The wise virgins are those who, embracing the time available to them, were prepared at the first onset of the coming of the Lord. But the foolish were those who were lax and unmindful. They troubled themselves only over present matters and, forgetting what God said, did not direct their efforts toward hope for resurrection.

Augustine: It is some great thing, some exceedingly great thing, that this oil signifies. Do you think it might be charity? If we try out this hypothesis, we hazard no precipitate judgment. I will tell you why charity seems to be signified by the oil. The apostle says, “I will show you a still more excellent way.” “If I speak with the tongue of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” This is charity. It is “that way above the rest,” which is with good reason signified by the oil. For oil swims above all liquids. Pour in water, and pour in oil upon it; the oil will swim above. Pour in oil, pour in water upon it; the oil will swim above. If you keep the usual order, it will be uppermost; if you change the order, it will be uppermost. “Charity never fails.”

Augustine: What is the meaning of “took no oil with them”? What is “in their lamps”? In their hearts. For this reason the apostle wrote, “Indeed, this is our glory, the testimony of our conscience.” There is the oil, the precious oil. This oil is of the gift of God. We can put oil into our lamps, but we ourselves cannot create the olive. See, I have oil. But did I create the oil? It is of the gift of God. So you have oil. Carry it with you. What does it mean to “carry it with you”? To have it within, where it is pleasing to God. Note: those “foolish virgins, who brought no oil with them,” wish to please a human audience by that abstinence of theirs by which they are called virgins, and by their good works, when they seem to carry lamps. But wishing to please human spectators, doing praiseworthy works, they forgot to carry with them the necessary oil.

Epiphanius the Latin: Those ten virgins, whom the Lord compared with the kingdom of heaven, were set up as an example for all virgins. They went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride. This means that they had received the grace of the Holy Spirit. They had come forth as virgins never stained by sin and had left behind earthly matters to meet Christ and the church. “But five were foolish and five wise. For the wise took oil with them along with their lamps. But the foolish did not take oil.” Thus they were foolish, because they were not prepared for the future but only for the present. Thus they were foolish, because they did not have works of compassion. For the oil is compassion. But the wise took oil with their lamps. Thus they were wise, because they took these things not on account of people but on account of God. Thus they were wise, because they were virgins not for the sake of the present but the future. Thus they were wise, because they had works of compassion. Thus they were wise, because they were virgins in spirit and body.

Augustine: But if it is good to abstain from the unlawful excitements of the senses, and on that account every Christian soul has received the name of virgin, why then are five admitted and five rejected? They are both virgins, and yet half are rejected. It is not enough that they are virgins but that they also have lamps. They are virgins by reason of abstinence from unlawful indulgence of the senses. But they have lamps by reason of good works. Of these good works the Lord says, "Let your works shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Again he said to his disciples, "Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning." In the "girded loins" is virginity. In the "burning lamps" is good works.

Augustine: But he tarried. And "while he tarried, they all slept." What is "all"? Both the foolish and the wise. "All slumbered and slept." But is this sleeping good? What does this sleep mean at this time? Might it mean that during the delay of the bridegroom there is an inattentiveness, so that "because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold"? Are we to understand this sleep in this way? I don't like that reading, and I will tell you why. Because among the ten are the five wise virgins. Certainly when the Lord said, "And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold," he then went on directly to say, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." So on this premise, where would you place the wise virgins? Are they not among those that will "endure to the end"? They would not be admitted within unless they had "endured to the end." No coldness of love then crept over them. In them love did not grow cold. Love preserves its glow even to the very end. And because it glows even to the end, therefore are the gates of the bridegroom opened to them. So they are told to enter in, just as did that excellent servant to whom it was said, "Enter into the joy of thy Lord."

What then is the meaning of "they all slept"? There is another sleep which no one escapes. Don't you remember the apostle saying, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who are asleep," that is, concerning those who are dead? For why are they called "those who are asleep," except that they all have died in their own time? Therefore it is said "they all slept." Do you imagine that just because one is wise, she does not have to die? Whether the virgin is foolish or wise, all suffer equally the sleep of death.

Hilary of Poitiers: The delay of the bridegroom is the time for repentance. The sleep of those waiting is the peaceful rest of believers. The delay has given time for repentance. The cry comes at midnight, when no one yet knows what is happening. The sound of the

trumpet of God heralds his coming, rousing all to go out and meet the bridegroom. The taking up of the lamps is the return of souls into their bodies. And the light shining from them is the consciousness of good work, which is contained in our bodies, which are like flasks.

Augustine: Note then, beloved, that before those virgins slept, it is not said that their lamps were extinguished. The lamps of the wise virgins burned with an inward oil, with the assurance of a good conscience, with an inner glory, with an inmost charity. Yet the lamps of the foolish virgins were also still burning. In what way were they burning? They burned because there was no lack of praise among human onlookers. But after that they arose, that is, in the resurrection from the dead. They began to trim their lamps, that is, began to prepare to render to God an account of their works. And because there is then no human beholder to praise them, all persons are wholly employed in their own cause. There is no one then who is not thinking of self. Therefore there were none to sell them oil.

Augustine: “But the wise replied, ‘Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ” This is hardly the voice of those who give counsel but rather those who rebuke. Why are they scornful? Because they were wise, because wisdom was in them. For they were not wise by anything that belonged to them. Rather that wisdom was in them of which it is written in a certain Scripture that wisdom shall say to those that despised her, when they have fallen upon the evils which she threatened them, “I will laugh over your destruction.” No wonder the wise mock the foolish virgins. And what is this mocking?

“Go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves,” you who never desired to live well but because people praised you, who sold you oil. Who are these who “sold you oil”? They are the ones who sell praises. Who sells praises, but flatterers? How much better would it have been for you not to have acquiesced to flatterers, and to have carried oil within, and for the sake of a good conscience to have done all good works....

Go then to those who deal in human praise, as you have been accustomed to doing, but do not expect the wise to give you oil at this crucial moment. Why? “Lest there not be enough for us and you.” What is “lest there not be enough”? This was not spoken in any lack of hope but in a sober and godly humility. For though the good person have a good conscience, how does he know how the final judge, who is deceived by no one, will judge? He has a good conscience; no sins conceived in the heart argue with him. Yet, though his

conscience is good, because of the daily sins of human life, he says to God daily, “Forgive us our debts,” on the assumption that he has already done what comes next, “as we also forgive our debtors.” He has broken his bread to the hungry from the heart; from the heart has he clothed the naked. Out of that inward oil he has done good works, and yet in that judgment even his good conscience trembles.

Hilary of Poitiers: Because the foolish were not able to go out and meet the bridegroom, since their lamps had gone out, they asked the wise to share their oil. They replied that they could not give them oil for there would perhaps not be enough. They told them to go to the dealers and buy for themselves. These foolish were not part of the group entering the wedding feast but late and unworthy of entering. They had lost their opportunity.

Augustine: “And those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut.” Then the foolish virgins came afterward. But had they bought any oil? Had they found any from whom they might buy it? No. Therefore they found the doors shut. They began to knock, but too late.

Cyril of Alexandria: Jesus compares the rulers of the people with virgins. The person who discharges a sacred function must be undefiled in soul and body, just as Paul says, “that she might be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit.” For it is customary for the Scripture to divide the present age into five seasons or times.⁴⁹ It assigns to each time both God-fearing and foolish souls, just as each time has wise persons and simpletons, righteous persons and wicked ones. In the parable all the virgins go out with their lamps. Jesus indicates by this that all souls have been illuminated by God through innate and natural laws but also indeed by the laws written by Moses. Now all the virgins went out to meet the bridegroom. All were determined to seek favor with God and to join themselves spiritually to the bridegroom. He sows in the hearts of the faithful the seed of every kind of virtue. Indeed, this is why he is called a bridegroom! Nevertheless some prove to be undistinguished, though they possess an illumination from God.... He mockingly calls their drowsiness the death of the flesh, which by necessity will go before both wise and foolish, whom the trumpet of the angels awakes at the time of Christ’s second coming. For all who have been rendered powerless by death are awakened, the good and the bad, and all are made ready to present their defense before the judge. This is represented in the parable when each virgin trims her lamp, summing up all that has occurred in her life. The thoughtless virgins have brought no oil with them. Their soul begins to grow gloomy and as if snuffed out departs into a delirious state, so as to think they will be shown mercy

through the virtue of the others. They are rejected as the other virgins say there is not enough for us and for you. The virtue of each scarcely suffices for the salvation of the soul, because even those who are very wise transgress in many ways.

John Calvin: Though this exhortation — as will appear from the conclusion of it—has nearly the same object with the former, yet it is properly added, in order to confirm believers in perseverance. Our Lord knew how strongly the nature of men is inclined to idleness, and how, for the most part, they not only grow weary after a great lapse of time, but give way through sudden dislike. To remedy this disease, he taught his disciples that they were not duly fortified, unless they had sufficient perseverance for a long period. When this is ascertained to be the design of the parable, we ought not to trouble ourselves much with minute investigations, which have nothing to do with what Christ intended. Some people give themselves a good deal of uneasiness about the lamps, the vessels, and the oil; but the plain and natural meaning of the whole is, that it is not enough to have ardent zeal for a short time, if we have not also a constancy that never tires. And Christ employs a very appropriate parable to express this. A little before, he had exhorted the disciples, that as they had a journey to perform through dark and dreary places, they should provide themselves with lamps; but as the wick of the lamp, if it be not supplied with oil, gradually dries up, and loses its brightness, Christ now says, that believers need to have incessant supplies of courage, to support the flame which is kindled in their hearts, otherwise their zeal will fail ere they have completed the journey.

Matthew 25:1. Then shall the kingdom of heaven. By this term is meant the condition of the future Church, which was to be collected by the authority and direction of Christ. He employs this remarkable title, that believers may not deceive themselves by an erroneous opinion that they have arrived at absolute perfection. The parable is borrowed from the ordinary custom of life; for it was a childish speculation of Jerome and others, to adduce this passage in praise of virginity; while Christ had no other object in view than to lessen the uneasiness which they might be apt to feel in consequence of the delay of his coming. He says, therefore, that he asks nothing more from us than is usually done for friends at a marriage-feast. The custom was, that virgins, who are tender and delicate—should, by way of respect, accompany the bridegroom to his chamber. But the general instruction of the parable consists in this, that it is not enough to have been once ready and prepared for the discharge of duty, if we do not persevere to the end.

Vs 2. Five were wise. Towards the close of the former chapter, our Lord specially required steward to be wise, (Matthew 24:45) for it is reasonable, that the heavier the charge which any man sustains, and the more important the matters in which he is employed, the wisdom with which he conducts himself should be the greater. But now he demands wisdom from all the children of God in general, that they may not, through inconsiderate rashness, expose themselves to be the prey of Satan. Now this kind of wisdom he describes by saying, that they are to provide themselves with the supplies necessary for completing the course of their life. For the warmth of our impatience makes us look upon the time, however short, as far too long protracted; and next, our poverty is such, that we need supplies for every hour.

Vs 5. And while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. Some interpret this slumbering in a bad sense, as if believers, along with others, abandoned themselves to sloth, and were asleep amidst the vanities of the world; but this is altogether inconsistent with the intention of Christ, and with the structure of the parable. There would be greater probability in explaining it to denote death, which overtakes believers before the coming of Christ; for it is not at that time only that we must look for salvation, but also when we have left the world and are sleeping in Christ. But I take it more simply as denoting earthly occupations, in which believers must be engaged, so long as they dwell in the body; and, though forgetfulness of the kingdom of God ought never to steal upon them, yet the distracting influence of the occupations of this world is not inappropriately compared to sleep. For they cannot be so constantly occupied with the thought of meeting Christ, as not to be distracted, or retarded, or entangled by a variety of cares, in consequence of which, while they watch, they are partly asleep.

Vs 6. At midnight a cry arose. With respect to the cry I view it as taken metaphorically for his sudden arrival; for we know, that when anything new and unexpected happens, men are wont to make a loud noise. True, indeed, our Lord cries daily, that he will come quickly, (Revelation 22:20;) but at that, time, the whole frame of the world will resound with the cry, and his dreadful majesty will fill heaven and earth in such a manner, as not only to awaken those who are asleep, but to bring the dead out of their graves, (John 5:28.)

Vs 8. And the foolish said to the wise. This is a reproof of the late repentance of those who never think of what they are in want of, till the door is shut against every remedy. For those who do not make provision for a long period are charged with folly, because they

are careless, and flatter themselves amidst their poverty, and allow the season of mutual intercourse to pass in such a way as to despise the aids which were offered to them. As they do not, in proper time, bethink themselves about procuring oil, Christ, mocking the knowledge which they have acquired when it is too late, shows how their stupidity will be punished, when they shall see themselves to be empty and unprovided, while there is no remedy.

Vs 9. Lest there be not enough for you and us. We know that the Lord distributes his gifts so variously to each, according to his measure, in order that they may give mutual aid to each other, and may employ for the general advantage what has been entrusted to each individual; and that in this way is preserved the sacred connection which exists among the members of the Church. But Christ here points out the time when he shall summon all men to his tribunal, each carrying his bundle, that he may bring with him according as he has done in his body. That portion of grace received, which every man has laid up for himself, is, therefore, justly compared to a stock of provisions for a journey, which would not be enough for a greater number of persons.

But rather go to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. These words immediately follow, and are not intended as an admonition, but a reproof; and the meaning is: "There once was a time for buying, which you ought not to have neglected; for oil was at that time offered for sale, but the means of obtaining it are now withdrawn." And yet it is foolish in the Papists to infer from this, that by our own virtues or industry we obtain the gift of perseverance. For the word buy does not at all imply that a price has been given; as appears clearly from the passage in Isaiah, (55:1) where the Lord, while he invites us to buy, demands no price, but informs us, that he has wine and milk in abundance, to be gratuitously bestowed. There is no other way of obtaining it, therefore, but to receive by faith what is offered to us.

Vs 10. And the door was shut. At length it follows that the door of the heavenly kingdom will be shut against all who have not made provision, because they failed in the middle of the course. We must not enter here into minute inquiries, how it is that Christ says that the foolish virgins went to buy for it means nothing else than that all who shall not be ready at the very moment when they shall be called will be shut out from entering into heaven.