

Stay Awake: Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning

Matthew 25:1-13

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What's the deal?

Over and over, Jesus talks about helping others,
about including others,
and then here he tells a parable in which he says
the reign of God is like
one group of women who will not share with another group of women
and a bridegroom who locks the second group out.

That's just plain weird.

This parable is only in Matthew,
and it just doesn't seem to match what Jesus says everywhere else.

I was puzzled.

So I did some searching.

I looked into first century wedding customs in Israel, and learned this:

Weddings took place in the early autumn and in the winter,
after the harvest;
The days are short then, and the sun's light is not enough
because a wedding feast begins in the evening and continues into the night
and then into the next day and night
Sometimes for as long as seven days
So, lamps –
which are not needed in the spring and summer –
are necessary.

Everyone –

parents, family, neighbors, friends, and strangers – everyone
provides light for this event.

This is important,

Because one of things light is, is a symbol of happiness
so a wedding must have plenty of light.

Generally, people buy oil for their lamps in the town where the wedding will be held.

Sometimes, people bring their own oil.

When everything is ready,

A group of women go to the bride's home

And a group of men go to the groom's home

There they wait and celebrate together until the bride or the groom is ready.

Then each group escorts either the bride or the groom to the wedding place.
The groom arrives first,
and then he and his party go out with lamps to meet the bride.
(See also Gn 25:63-64)

When the couple reaches the place for the wedding
they go inside and so do their guests.
Then the doors are locked so that the focus can be on the wedding.
Even invited guests are left outside if they come late.
So, that is actually normal.

Now, in the parable Jesus tells,
the foolish women are late for the wedding because their lamps weren't ready.
They're not late because they slept.
They're late because they didn't have enough oil for their lamps.

So, I wondered what connections and associations someone hearing this story
in the 2nd century from Jesus would make.

I remembered that the Torah – the Way of God and the Word of God
and the commandments (remember these are Mitzvot, aka ways to be like God)
are both called a lamp
both in Scripture and in daily Jewish usage:

We hear in Proverbs:

When you walk, they will lead you;
when you lie down, they will watch over you;
and when you awake, they will talk with you.
For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light.

and

in Psalm 119:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

And in Jewish tradition,
light – from lamps – is a symbol of
God's presence
and a symbol of
the role of the Word of God (Torah) as a guide to a life
of harmony and wholeheartedness with God (Maimonides)

And the flame, the light from a lamp is even more:
the flame is a symbol of spirituality
and
the flame of the lamp is our own mirror,
in which we see reflected the longings and strivings of our deepest self,
the flame of the lamp is a mirror,
in which we remember we are made in the image of God.

As Proverbs says;
The human soul is the lamp of the Lord,

We are the lamps of God
and our light illuminates the world around us

The rabbis of Jesus time put it this way:

What use is made of olive oil? It is put into a lamp,
and then the two together give light as though they were one.
Hence the Holy One will say . . .

My children,
 since My light is your light
 and your light is My light,
 let us go together – you and I –
 and give light to [the world]. (*Yalkut Shimoni*)

(repeat) God will say:

Since My light is your light
 and your light is My light,
 let us go together – you and I –
 and give light to [the world].

Isn't that lovely
 and hopeful?

And it suggests to me

That the parable today is not literally about lamps
 It's about how we ourselves are living as lamps,
 as images of God,
 illuminating the world around us
 with the light of God
 as Jesus did.

And the oil that we need to bring and be light to the world
 is the Word of God
 and

 our actions that spring from that Word
 (as our Jewish brothers and sisters would say, Torah & mitzvot)

As one rabbi says, echoing Jesus' parable:

 A life without [both God's Word and our actions],
 however aflame with the desire to come close to God,
 is incapable of sustaining its flame.

It might generate flashes of ecstatic spiritual experience,
 but lacking the oil of genuine divine substance,
 these quickly die out
 and fail to introduce any enduring light into the world.

[On the other hand]

 Every deed is oil for the soul.
 With every act that constitutes a fulfillment of the divine will,
 our lives are rendered into burning lamps,
 alight with a flame that vacillates

from heaven to earth and back again,
illuminating the world in the process.

And

Those who study the *Word of God*
give forth *light* wherever they may be.
It is like a person who stands in the dark
with a *lamp* in his hand.” (Exodus Rabbah 36, 3)

This is the connection that the foolish women do not have.

And the wise women –

who are connected with God through Word and deed –
can not give this to them.

It isn't about selfishness or unkindness.

It's just that they can't create the relationship each one of them has with God
for someone else.

The foolish ones don't have that inner connection,
the kind of relationship with God
in which they hear God say:

My light is your light
and your light is My light,
let us go together – you and I –
and give light to [the world].

Each one of us has to create and cultivate that relationship with God ourselves.

we do that bit by bit, every day;
it's like accumulating oil, drop by drop,
so that the lamp doesn't run out.

This is why our daily spiritual practices are so important.
These help us build a relationship with God
that is based on deep gratitude and thankfulness,
A relationship that lightens the world around us

As Jesus tells us today:

No one else can do that for us;
we are the ones who are responsible for this relationship,
we are the ones who are called to respond.

So the challenge remains, the same now as it was 2,000 years ago:

How is each one of us building our relationship with God?
Are we spending time each day focusing on this relationship,
filling our lamps with oil,
so that we will be ready, as the prophet Isaiah says,
for God's call:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

The world so needs us to be light.

As God says,

“Let us go together – you and I – and give light to [the world].”

Amen.

Sources:

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Texts:

Matthew 25:1-13

‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of

them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up 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 replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Proverbs 6:20-23

My child, keep your father's commandment,
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
Bind them upon your heart always;
tie them around your neck.
When you walk, they will lead you;
when you lie down, they will watch over you;
and when you awake, they will talk with you.
For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light,

Proverbs 20:27

The human soul is the lamp of the Lord,
searching every inmost part.

Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.