

# THE DIVIDING PROPHET

## + SESSION OUTLINE

1. Jesus divides the wise and the fools (Matt. 25:1-4,13).
2. Jesus divides the diligent and the faithless (Matt. 25:24-30).
3. Jesus divides the compassionate and the indifferent (Matt. 25:31-40).

Background Passage: Matthew 25

## + WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Followers of Jesus are to live expectantly, faithfully, and compassionately as they await His return and His coming kingdom.

## + HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Jesus promised that one day He will return to usher in the fullness of God's kingdom. Until that day, Jesus instructed His followers to make the most of their time, living as His ambassadors, telling others how they too can be part of the coming kingdom.

## + HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have come to know the exceeding value of God's kingdom, we urgently proclaim the gospel to the world so that others might be brought into the kingdom as well.

# GROUP TIME

**Group content** found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



## SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

## INTRODUCTION

**ASK:** As participants arrive, ask: **How do parables help us understand the truths Jesus conveyed?** (parables help us picture the things He taught that are hard to understand; the imagery in parables brings Jesus's truths to life; parables make truths more memorable; they position you to see the truths from the right perspective; they help make truths that seem abstract more tangible)

**TRANSITION:** Jesus promised that one day He will return. When He returns, He will divide people into one of two categories: those who have placed their faith in Him for salvation and those who have placed their faith in something else. Jesus desires for us to be prepared for His return. We don't know when He will come back, but we know for sure that He will come back. In the meantime, He has given us good work to do to build His kingdom, not that our work can earn us our salvation but it is evidence of our salvation.

**SUMMARIZE:** Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- In His last week on earth before His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus's disciples, sitting privately with Jesus, asked when He was coming back at the end of the age (Matt. 24:3). The disciples understood and believed that Jesus had to go away, but they also knew that He would one day return to restore all things. Jesus answered them with parables—fictional stories used to convey moral and spiritual truth—to explain that no one knows the time or hour, but it was still necessary for them to prepare for His return and work to build His kingdom while they waited.



**Listen to session-by-session training every week on**

*Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, or Spotify:*

*[ministrygrid.com/gospelproject](http://ministrygrid.com/gospelproject) | [gospelproject.com/leader-training](http://gospelproject.com/leader-training).*

# POINT 1

## JESUS DIVIDES THE WISE AND THE FOOLS (MATT. 25:1-4,13).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 25:1-4,13** from his or her Bible.

**1** “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. **3** For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, **4** but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. . . . **13** Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

**EXPLAIN:** Using the content below, explain from **verses 1-4** Jesus’s parable about the kingdom of heaven (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 46).

In God’s kingdom, Jesus will one day return like a groom on his wedding day, and His people need to be expectant of it, prepared, and ready.

- In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus described the kingdom of God in the setting of a wedding feast. Back then, groomsmen and bridesmaids had specific jobs. The groomsmen would usher the groom from his home to the home of his bride to pick her up. The bridesmaids would be ready to usher the bride and groom into the groom’s home for the wedding feast when they arrived.
- If the wedding feast was late in the evening, being dark outside, the bridesmaids’ job was to have lamps prepared to show the bride and groom the way to the feast. Being a bridesmaid was a position of honor, much like it is today. But in the parable, not all the bridesmaids gave their position its proper weight.
- Everything about the ten bridesmaids was the same except one thing. Five were wise, and five were foolish. The five who were foolish brought only their lamps; they did not prepare for any extenuating circumstances. They did not stay alert for possible delays. The five who were wise, however, brought their lamps and extra oil in anticipation of any problems. They wanted the groom to have a perfect day, and they thought about all they could do to make that happen for him.

**ASK:** Let’s not be like the foolish bridesmaids. Ask (DDG pp. 42,46):

From Day 2 in the DDG: **What are some things that we can do to stay prepared for Jesus’s return?** (live devoted to God; forgive others; share the gospel with others; be the hands and feet of Jesus in service; pursue a relationship with God through prayer and reading His Word)

### VIRGIN

In this context, “virgin,” *parthenoi* in Greek, refers to a young woman. Jesus’s referring to the ten women as virgins has more to do with their role as bridesmaids than with their purity in this parable.

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Watchfulness is required, lest Christ come to take the church for his bride at the least expected moment, when some of those waiting are seeking the praise of others.”<sup>1</sup>

–Augustine (354–430)

**SAY:** “Though we know our works don’t save us, being ready and alert for Jesus’s return involves works.” Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine (DDG p. 46).

**Key Doctrine #72: Justification and Works:** Justification is not the result of human effort or good works but through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Eph. 2:10). Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Using the content below and **verse 13**, highlight the fact that though we don’t know when Jesus will return, we need to be alert.

- The parable of the ten virgins was part of Jesus’s response to the disciples’ question on when He would return (24:3). Jesus was teaching His disciples that they would be wise to prepare for Him to possibly take longer to return than they might expect. At the same time, they needed to be ready because He could return at any moment. The question for the disciples wasn’t if Jesus was coming but when. Jesus taught them to be alert because no one knows the day or hour except God the Father.
- As Jesus delivered His final teachings to His disciples, He showed them that justification and works go hand in hand. Like the bridesmaids in the story, His disciples were chosen to do a very important job, not to earn their salvation but because they had received that salvation as a gift by faith.
- We are not justified by anything that we ourselves have done, can do, or will do in the future. We are justified solely based on our faith in the finished work of Jesus, who took our place on the cross. Our good works are not our key into the kingdom of heaven, they are the evidence that we belong. Good works are the fruit of faith in Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Good works are reflections of our love for God and our faith in Jesus. James 2:17 says, “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

**DISCUSS:** As we are to be prepared and alert in service to Christ, not knowing the hour when He will return, ask (DDG p. 46):

**How do good works verify genuine faith and make our justification evident to others?** (good works show that faith is not just passive belief; good works are a reflection of the character of God; good works accompanied with speaking the gospel message are a tangible way for us to reflect Jesus)

**TRANSITION:** Jesus divides the wise and the fools. Both wisdom and foolishness are reflections of the heart that are seen in our actions. What we do externally reveals who we truly are internally. And what we do with what God gives us is a reflection of what we think about God.

# POINT 2

## JESUS DIVIDES THE DILIGENT AND THE FAITHLESS (MATT. 25:24-30).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 25:24-30** from his or her Bible.

**24** “He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, **25** so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ **26** But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? **27** Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. **28** So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. **29** For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. **30** And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

**EXPLAIN:** Using the content below, explain from **verses 24-27** (DDG p. 46):

Our actions reflect our belief about God, and our belief should include God being all-powerful and sovereign with a desire to build His kingdom. We can either participate in that effort or detract from it.

- In this parable, Jesus divided the diligent and the faithless. The master gave talents to three of his servants while he went away on a journey. He gave them talents in order that they would invest what they were given and return to him what belonged to him with interest. Essentially, the master was asking his servants to build his kingdom while he was away (25:14-23).
- The final servant received one talent—less than the other two servants, but still a considerable amount of money. When the servant came to his master, he showed himself to be faithless through his inaccurate assessment of the master’s character. His perception of the master’s character was inconsistent with the master’s response to the other servants (vv. 21,23). The servant also failed to understand that he and all that he produced belonged to the master anyway. To say that the master reaped where he had not sown was not only inaccurate, it also showed a misunderstanding of his role and his relationship to the master.
- The servant responded to the responsibility given to him by his master in fear instead of faithfulness. He buried his talent in order that he not lose his master’s money. But his action was less an act of self-preservation and more an act of disobedience and disbelief in his master’s goodness. His words and his actions were reflections of his heart. What we do is a direct reflection of what we believe. If we believe Jesus to be good and His salvation to be true, we will respond in loving obedience to building His kingdom.

### A TALENT

A talent was the highest currency in Roman society. Just one talent was a considerable amount of money, about two decades worth of wages.

- The servant showed that he was evil and lazy through his disobedience. The master's repetition of the servant's character assessment isn't the master validating what the servant was saying. Instead, the master pointed out the logical inconsistency. If the master truly were as harsh as the servant thought, he should have, at minimum, deposited the talent with the bankers to earn interest. The servant didn't even do the minimum.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 46)

**How are our actions a direct reflection of our understanding of God's character?** (if we believe in His holiness, we would want to be holy too; if we believe in His goodness, we will trust Him in trials; if we believe in His grace, we would want to share that grace with others)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Using the content below, explain from **verses 28-30** (DDG p. 46):

We are blessed in order to advance the kingdom, but for those who reject this privilege, judgment will come.

- The master's expectations were realistic and individualized. But the servant failed to see the honor of his responsibility because he didn't like that he was building a kingdom that wasn't his own. He failed to see that his master desired to be good to him and actually give him more responsibility and authority. So the master responded by taking away the talent that he gave the servant and removing him from his household altogether since the servant's actions proved he didn't belong.
- Then Jesus summarized the parable. Those who are responsible with what's been given them will be rewarded, and for those who are not, their resources will be taken from them and they will be cast out on judgment day. Jesus's reference to "weeping and gnashing of teeth" usually is about the end times. Jesus's warning was stern and serious, not to be taken lightly.

**DISCUSS:** Because we are saved by grace through faith, it seems easy to be light-handed on our works for the Lord. Discuss (DDG p. 47):

**How can we be diligent in God's work, knowing that our faith should be displayed in our service to the King and His kingdom?** (in spreading the good news of Jesus to those who don't know; in being hands and feet to those who are marginalized; in showing the love of Christ to the world, knowing He loved us first; in living obedient, holy lives for His glory and not our own)

**TRANSITION:** God desires that we all take part in advancing the kingdom that He has prepared for us. We each have a different role, but all the work reflects the compassionate heart of God, who sent His Son to die in the place of sinners.

# POINT 3

## JESUS DIVIDES THE COMPASSIONATE AND THE INDIFFERENT (MATT. 25:31-40).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 25:31-40** from his or her Bible.

**31** “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **32** Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33** And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. **34** Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. **35** For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ **37** Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? **38** And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? **39** And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ **40** And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

**DIAGRAM:** Lead the group to make a diagram or chart of the actions of those inheriting the kingdom, as identified by Jesus in **verses 31-36**.

**EXPLAIN:** Using the content below, explain from **verses 31-36** (DDG p. 47):

When Jesus returns, He will divide those who inherit the kingdom and those who don't based on their true faith in Christ as seen through their compassionate works on earth.

- Jesus described His return in verse 31 as glorious and authoritative. Jesus will gather every nation. He will divide people like a shepherd divides sheep and goats. The image of Jesus sitting on the throne and separating each person to His right and left gives us context as to what the right and left mean. To the right of a king is always a place of prominence and honor while the left is a place of disgrace.
- Sheep and goats frequently grazed together, but when it was shearing time, they needed to be separated. From afar, sheep and goats may look similar to each other, but sheep had valuable wool. So as Jesus divides the sheep and goats, He puts the sheep in the place of prominence.
- Jesus said in verse 34 to those on His right that they would inherit the kingdom. An inheritance isn't something that you earn; it is something you receive for who you are. Those on the right didn't work to inherit the kingdom of God; their work came because they had an inheritance in the kingdom of God.

- God has prepared His kingdom for us to receive it. Hell was never meant for God's beloved creation. God has always desired that humankind enjoy an eternal relationship with Him unencumbered by the presence of sin. We don't have the ability to do the work necessary to remove our sin and guilt that has condemned us to hell. Jesus has done all that work on our behalf. We are justified by placing our faith in the work that He has done.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 47)

**How does the reality that the kingdom is an inheritance challenge the idea of earning salvation through good works?** (the kingdom can't be earned; it places the focus on God's sovereignty; it emphasizes the reality of God's grace)

**CHALLENGE:** Using the content below and **verses 37-40**, challenge your group to think about the following truth (DDG p. 47):

When believers show love, service, and compassion for those in need, we show our true faith in Jesus and shall have entrance into the kingdom.

- Notice in verse 37 the surprise of the righteous. The great acts of compassion that proved their inheritance with Jesus are unknown to them. They were merely being obedient in loving their neighbor, caring for the downtrodden, and opening up their homes to strangers and foreigners. They knew that being a follower of Jesus meant doing these things Jesus would have done. They didn't realize that He viewed their service as if they had done it for Him.
- Just like how the wise bridesmaids gave proper weight to their position, those on the right are blessed to receive the kingdom that God prepared for them, and their compassion was simply the fruit of their position.
- Our identity as those who will be on Jesus's right should stir our affections to share the message of the gospel through our words and show the message of the cross through our actions.

**DISCUSS:** It is easy to serve and love family and friends. Discuss (DDG p. 47):

**What are examples of serving "the least of these"?** (going out of our comfort zone to host a refugee family; adopting a child or a teenager, whether domestic or from a foreign nation; serving consistently in a soup kitchen to build relationships; teaching a Bible study in a prison)

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Decide as a group to do a service project in the coming month or quarter to put this lesson into action.



# MY RESPONSE

**SAY:** Jesus promised that one day He will return to usher in the fullness of God's kingdom. Until that day, Jesus instructed us to make the most of our time, telling others how they too can be part of the coming kingdom. Because we have come to know the exceeding value of God's kingdom, we urgently proclaim the gospel to the world so that others might be brought into the kingdom as well.

## HEAD:

We are justified through faith in Jesus alone. But being justified by faith in Jesus and not works does not mean that we do not have work to do. God has given each of us gifts and abilities to steward for the growth of His kingdom. Our good works are a tangible demonstration of our faith to the watching world around us. Our good works are how we both wisely prepare and expectantly await the return of Jesus.

**What would your current works say of your current faith?**

## HEART:

The news that we are not justified by our works is good news because we would all fail. Thankfully, we are justified by faith in the work of Jesus. So, we now get to participate in the building of His kingdom through our good works. Our understanding of how justification and works go hand in hand should encourage us. Through our faith in Jesus, we receive the privilege of participating in what God has been preparing since He made the world.

**How can we praise God for allowing us to partner with Him in building His kingdom?**

## HANDS:

Jesus will come back to establish His kingdom one day, and when He does, He will divide the wise and the foolish, the diligent and the faithless, and the compassionate and the indifferent. The gospel is only good news if people hear it and then believe it. The reality of Jesus's return should spur us to prepare by building His kingdom through our proclamation of the gospel. God desires that no one be separated from Him for the rest of eternity. We must steward all that God has given us to bring as many people as possible into the kingdom with us.

**How can we steward our gifts for the growth of God's kingdom?**

**PRAY:** Jesus, You don't need us but give us the privilege of being used by You. Help us to be ready in anticipation of Your return. Help us to serve You by serving others. Help us to be faithful in all circumstances. Amen.

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"True religion is a habitual recollection of God and intention to serve him; and this turns everything into gold. We are apt to suppose that we need something splendid to evince our devotion, but true devotion equals things: washing plates and cleaning shoes is a high office, if performed in a right spirit."<sup>2</sup>

—John Newton  
(1725–1807)

# EXTRA

## **POINT 1: JESUS DIVIDES THE WISE AND THE FOOLS** (MATT. 25:1-4,13).

### **+ COMMENTARY**

“Instead of faithful and unfaithful servants, now we have wise and foolish bridesmaids. Parthenoi (‘virgins’) refers to young women of marriageable age. The word is chosen not to point out their lack of sexual activity but their intimate relation to the bride. The imagery of the parable accurately reflects typical customs of first-century Palestinian wedding festivities. A welcoming processional escorts the newly married couple from the bride’s home to a great banquet at the bridegroom’s home, some unspecified time after the legal nuptials have been exchanged. Torches light the way in the darkness, so all the bridesmaids have to take enough oil to keep them burning for as long as might be necessary. The two groups of women are described as exactly alike in everything except their preparations. Thus the fact that five fall in each category does not teach that there will be the same number saved as lost.”<sup>3</sup>

### **+ ILLUSTRATION**

Imagine someone standing at the base of a mountain eager to hike to the top of the mountain. He has filled his backpack with all the necessary supplies and equipment to make the trip. He has a map, a compass, food, water, a first-aid kit, and warm clothing in his backpack. He displays wisdom through his preparedness and should be able to tackle any obstacles that come his way. Because of his preparation, he even eliminates some obstacles, such as hunger and dehydration.

Now imagine a second person at the base of the very same mountain. He has no backpack, no supplies, and no equipment. He has no map, no compass, no food, no water, and no warm clothing. He displays foolishness in his lack of preparation and basically makes the entire trip up the mountain one obstacle after another.

It’s obvious in this example that the person who is well prepared will be able to successfully get to his destination. He will face challenges, but he will do so with the necessary tools. Because of his wisdom, he will be able to enjoy the trip, its views, and feel a sense of accomplishment at the end. On the other hand, the foolish and unprepared person will struggle to gain any headway up the mountain. The difficulties he faces will probably cause him to have to turn back.

# EXTRA

When it comes to Jesus's return, being prepared is essential for our journey to His kingdom. To be prepared, we must cultivate a relationship with God through prayer, live under the authority of His Word, and do everything we can to ensure that people who don't know Jesus have a chance to hear the gospel. Our wisdom and preparation will ensure that we are ready to face Jesus's judgment because we will not be judged on the basis of our work but on the basis of His completed work on the cross.

## **POINT 2: JESUS DIVIDES THE DILIGENT AND THE FAITHLESS** (MATT. 25:24-30).

### + **COMMENTARY**

"This parable must not be confused with the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27) though the two parables do have similarities. Please note that each servant in this parable was given money (a talent was worth about twenty years' wages) according to his ability. The man with much ability was given five talents; the man with average ability received two talents; the man with minimal ability received one talent. The talents represent opportunities to use our abilities. If five talents were given to a person with minimal ability, he would be destroyed by the heavy responsibility. But if only one talent were given to a man of great ability, he would be disgraced and degraded. God assigns work and opportunity according to ability. We are living in the period of time between Matthew 25:18 and 19. We have been assigned our ministries according to the abilities and gifts God has given us. It is our privilege to serve the Lord and multiply His goods."<sup>4</sup>

### + **ILLUSTRATION**

Imagine you went on a business trip and were put up in a five-star hotel. The hotel only offers valet parking for your vehicle, but they will also wash it and clean the inside if you request it. You take advantage of this perk when you valet your car. Imagine that at the end of your stay at the hotel, you go to get your vehicle, but the valet approaches you weeping and shaking. The valet explains the difficulty in giving you the keys. Imagine that the valet says to you, "Because I am a generous person, I am going to give you the keys to the car that I worked so hard to have." You would take the keys from the valet, explaining that the keys were never his to begin with. You gave him the keys to your car to hold and care for until you returned.

As silly as that sounds, this reflects the posture of many Christians when it comes to giving to God what belongs to Him. We, like the third servant, believe that our money and our work should belong to us, when nothing we have belongs to us at all. What we do with what God gives us proves what we believe to be true about God in our hearts.

## POINT 3: JESUS DIVIDES THE COMPASSIONATE AND THE INDIFFERENT (MATT. 25:31-40).

### + COMMENTARY

“The scene switches now to the glorious coming of the Son of Man. He is accompanied in his glory with all the angels, and he sits on his throne of glory. Before him all of the nations will be gathered (25:32). The debated expression ‘the nations’ has been interpreted to mean the church, all humanity, or all unbelievers, but within the Matthean context it is most likely intended to mean both Jews and Gentiles who throughout this age are the combined object of the Great Commission . . . The nations as entities are not judged but rather the people (NIV) within them: ‘He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The shepherd metaphor softens the judgment image but does not diminish the foreboding consequences of separating the sheep from the goats. ‘Sheep’ is a consistent image of the people of God, whether it refers to Israel (9:36; 10:6; 15:24; cf. Ezek. 34) or Jesus’ disciples (Matt. 10:16; cf. 26:31 quoting Zech. 13:7; John 10).”<sup>5</sup>

### + ILLUSTRATION

When it comes to the produce that makes it on the shelves in our grocery stores, it is important for processing plants to only send out the best of the best. There are several ways that they use machines to separate good apples from bad apples. One common method uses a machine called an apple grader. The apples are placed on a conveyor belt that moves them through the grader. As they pass through the grader, they are scanned by sensors that detect their size, shape, and color. The sensors then send this information to a computer that uses algorithms to determine which apples are good and which are bad. The good apples are then directed to a separate conveyor belt for packaging, while the bad apples are directed to a different conveyor belt for disposal or further processing.

Similar to how the machine separates the good apples from the bad, Jesus also separates the good from the bad. Jesus examines our character, our actions, and our hearts. Jesus knows our hearts better than we do. Jesus can’t be fooled by good works devoid of true faith, or fake faith devoid of good works. The standard for justification is faith in Jesus and Jesus alone. Those who meet the standard of justification by trusting in His saving work are sorted out from those who do not so that the former enter the kingdom of heaven while the latter receive the wages of their sin: death and judgment in hell.

#### References

1. Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 14–28, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 216.
2. John Newton, *The Life of John Newton: Once a Sailor, Afterwards Captain of a Slave Ship, and Subsequently Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London* (United States: American Tract Society, 1854), 112.
3. Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 369.
4. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 92.
5. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 809.