What is the meaning of the parable of the ten virgins?

As we take a good look at the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, we must acknowledge up front that there has been much debate as to the meaning of these words of our savior. At least one aspect of this parable can be known with absolute certainty. The bridegroom is Jesus Christ, and this parable describes His return. In the Old Testament (Isaiah 54:4-6; 62:4-5; Hosea 2:19), God pictures Himself as the “Husband” Of Israel, and in the New Testament (John 3:27-30; Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19-20), Christ is pictured as the bridegroom of the Church. The Church is described in Scripture as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32). The historical setting can also be known with a fair amount of certainty. In describing a first-century Jewish wedding. D. A. Carson in the Expositor’s Bible Commentary describe the setting this way: “Normally the bridegroom with some close friends left his home to go to the bride’s home, where there were various ceremonies, followed by a procession through the streets – after nightfall-to his home. The ten virgins may be bridesmaids who have been assisting the bride; and they expect to meet the groom as he comes from the brides house… everyone in the procession was expected to carry his or her own torch. Those without a torch would be assumed to be party crashers or ever brigands. The festivities, which might last several days, without formally get under way at the groom’s house”. The torch was either a lamp with a small oil tank and wick or a stick with a rag soaked in oil on the end of it which would require occasional re-soaking to maintain the flame. Of interpretive significance is which return of Christ is this? Is it His return for the rapture of the church, or is it His return to set up the Millennial Kingdom at the end of the Tribulation?

Dispensational scholars divide over this issue, and no attempt will be made to answer that question here. Regardless of which return it is, the lessons to be learned are relevant to both. The overall and easily seen thrust of the parable is that Christ will return at an unknown hour and that His people must be ready. Being ready means preparing for whatever contingency arises in our lives and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus at all times while we eagerly await His coming. As seen in the fact that all the virgins were sleeping when the call came indicates that it doesn’t matter what we are doing when Christ returns. We may be working, eating, sleeping, or pursuing leisure activities. Whatever it is, we must be doing it in such a way that we have to “make things right” (get more oil) when He comes. This would apply to either the coming of Christ for His Church or for the Tribulation saints as they await His second coming. Being ready for Christ’s return ultimately involves one major thing which manifests itself in several areas of our lives. If we would be ready for Christ’s return, we must be born again through saving faith in Jesus Christ… His death, burial and literal resurrection from the dead (John 3:16, 14:6; Romans 10:9 and 10; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 2:1-10). Saving faith in Jesus Christ will manifest itself in every aspect of our lives. The fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) will begin to show. A desire for greater holiness and less sin will be apparent. And a consistent looking for His coming will mark our lives. One of the best passages articulating what saving grace and faith look like in a believer’s life is Titus 2:11-14, “for the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passion, and to live self – controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good”. The five virgins who have the extra oil represent the truly born again who are looking with eagerness to the coming of Christ. They have saving faith and have determined that, whatever occurs, be it lengthy time or adverse circumstances, when Jesus returns, they will be looking with eagerness. The five virgins without oil represent false believers who enjoy the benefits of the Christian community without true love for Christ. They are more concerned about the party than about longing to see the bridegroom. Their hope is that their association with true believers (“give us some of your oil” of verse 8) will bring them into the kingdom at the end. This, of course, is never the case. One person’s faith in Jesus cannot save another. The “Lord, lord” and “I do not know you” of verses 11 and 22 fit very well with Jesus’ condemnation of the false believers of Matthew 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name , and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

May we not be found “going away to make the purchase” (vs. 10) when Christ returns. Take the time now to fill your lamp with oil and take extra along. Keep waiting and watching with joy and anticipation.