

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING BIBLE WORD PICTURES

Track 6 – Putting Together the Word Picture Trilogy in Matthew 24-25

Introduction and Context of the Three Parables

Before discussing the Parable of the Good/Evil Servant in particular, I'd like to talk about the various interpretations that have been offered not only for this parable, but for the following two parables (The Ten Virgins and The Talents) as well. While the Good/Evil Servant parable is seen in the gospel of Luke (12:41-48), the other two parables are seen *only in Matthew*; there is a reason! Most interpreters see the three parables as all making the same basic point, so they are usually grouped together. Here are most of the major interpretations of these parables (knowing that there are probably more out there!):

- The *prepared* are believers who have “worked” their way into the kingdom/heaven, while the *unprepared* did not do enough works to enter (Catholic/ Orthodox view).
- The *prepared* are believers who have given evidence of their faith, while the *unprepared* are those who have *professed* faith but were never saved, as seen by their works (Reformed).
- The *prepared* and the *unprepared* both represent believers, but the unprepared lose their salvation because they fail to persevere (Arminian).
- The *prepared* are the members of the Church, while the *unprepared* are unbelievers, and so will be punished in hell (General Evangelical view).
- The *prepared* and the *unprepared* both represent *believers*, but the unprepared believers are punished (temporally) during the Millennium (Bob Wilkin/Free Grace view).
- The *prepared* and the *unprepared* represent *Israel*. The prepared are the Jews who believe and prepare for Messiah, while the unprepared represent unbelieving Israel (Dispensational view).

As you can see, these views are VERY different from each other! Not only can the views help you see the “lens” with which the interpreters look, I'm sure you can see that each of the views has very practical repercussions. While this lesson will not try to answer/discuss each of the views I've given, let's consider some background information before we discuss the interpretation of the parable.

The (Common) Mistakes We Should Avoid

The 1st mistake which many interpreters make, and it has become more common recently as our culture looks for “instant answers”, occurs when they treat a parable (or parables) *in isolation*. That will most often lead us to interpret in line with the theological “lens” we've been given by those who taught us. Doing this gives us no real “anchor” on which to base our interpretation, and like a ship without an anchor, “drift” can occur in many different directions! We will find that *context is critical* if we are to find an answer that is consistent. For our discussion, that means that the immediate context (the tribulation and 2nd Coming) should help us, as well as the larger context of Matthew and its parallels in the other gospels.

The 2nd mistake which many interpreters make is to ignore the consistent use of terms. This is especially important when we are talking about Matthew, since we have established through many of our lessons that he alludes to Old Testament prophecies (and often quotes those prophets) and terms/ideas *throughout* Matthew. We should be careful to be sure that our interpretation is in line with those prophecies and terms...

The Context of the Parable of the Good/Evil Servant

While this parable, found in Matthew 24:45-51, is most often called “The Parable of the Two Servants,” you may have noticed that I simply call it “The Good/Evil Servant,” and I will explain why as we walk through the elements of the parable. Before I do, however, let’s look at the parable, because this one has many pieces in its “puzzle”:

- **Matthew 24:45-51:** *45 “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? 46 Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. 47 Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. 48 But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ 49 and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, 50 the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, 51 and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In order to understand this parable, let’s look more closely at the immediate context, and then once we have some clues, see if we can get more information from Matthew (and perhaps the larger scope of Scripture).

A Clue within the parable itself:

The first clue, found within the parable, is a very subtle one. While it can be seen in English, the Greek is more obvious here. Jesus begins the parable by asking, “*Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?*” Here Jesus points to a particular “servant” who has been given a particular “stewardship” or “responsibility”, but does not tell HOW they responded to that responsibility in His question. He simply states that they have been given a responsibility... He gives two answers to the question, one a positive response and the other a negative. In both answers, Jesus points back to His original “servant” by means of the use of the word “that” (a *demonstrative adjective* here). In other words, His positive response is about “THAT servant” (who had been given responsibility) and His negative response is about “THAT servant” (who had been given responsibility)! And now you know why I call this parable “The Parable of the Good (or) Evil Servant.” While many who teach this parable try to say that Jesus is speaking about two different “servants”, Jesus’ careful wording makes it clear that this is *one* “servant” who can make two *very* different choices. But can the context of the parable help us determine *who* that “servant” is?

Clues from the context of Matthew

While we pursue the question of the identity of the “servant,” let’s take a moment to think about what we know from the Gospel of Matthew and how this parable “fits” into Matthew’s chronology. We’ve already seen just how *Jewish* this gospel is:

- In the first several chapters, we see many Old Testament prophets quoted in order to point out Jesus’ fulfillment of their prophecies. Israel’s leaders would have known them...
- John the Baptist (in chapter 3) shows up to offer the Messianic kingdom and calls Israel to “*prepare* the way of the Lord” (in fulfillment of Micah 4, Isaiah 40:3-5 and other prophecies). Israel would either be “prepared” or “unprepared,” based on their response to Messiah Jesus.
- Jesus Himself begins to proclaim His offer of the Messianic kingdom if Israel is “prepared” to receive Him (by believing in Him and His message).

- In Matthew 10, we see the *disciples* (students) become *apostles* (who are sent) *only to Israel* in order to offer the kingdom *only to Israel* (10:5-6).
- In Matthew 12, it becomes clear that their many offers of the kingdom and its Messiah have been rejected, and Jesus declares His first judgment upon unbelieving Israel.
- In Matthew 13, Jesus teaches His disciples what the kingdom will look like in His absence, *because of Israel's* (national) rejection.
- In Matthew 14-22, Jesus is healing and teaching and confronting Israel's leaders, all the time demonstrating that He indeed was the Messiah and they indeed were worthy of judgment!
- In Matthew 23, Jesus gives a scathing rebuke and announces judgment upon Israel's "scribes and Pharisees".
- In Matthew 24 (leading up to the parable under discussion), Jesus answers His disciples' questions concerning the "end of the age" by telling them about the tribulation and its events. In His discussion, He quotes the prophet Daniel to make it clear that this refers to Israel's 70th week. It is during that "week" that Israel's King and Kingdom will again be offered, then to "all the nations", and then Messiah will indeed come as King.

And woven throughout Matthew's gospel has been Israel's *opportunity* to *accept* their Messiah (by *believing* in Him) or to *reject* Him (through *unbelief*). *And all of that brings us to this parable* (and two more yet to be discussed). What we should see through all of this is the consistent focus on *Israel*, both in Matthew's (unique) use of the "kingdom of heaven" (discussed in prior lessons) and in Jesus' promises to return to fulfill His covenantal promises to them (for which they will either be "prepared" or "unprepared"). Matthew's gospel is not simply another "story of Jesus," it has a particular audience in mind, as we've demonstrated throughout these lessons. Am I drawing you toward a conclusion yet?

Before we draw any conclusions, let's give just a bit more context. Notice where this parable "falls" (along with the 10 Virgins and the Talents parables). *Keep in mind* how methodical Matthew has been so far in his gospel... Jesus has *just* finished detailing the tribulation and the 2nd Coming (Daniel's 70th week). Then He gives this "set" of parables (in Matthew 24:45-25:30). The *very next thing* that Jesus discusses is the judgment of the Gentiles (the sheep and goats judgment). *What is missing in between?* The only missing piece in the timeline is the judgment of the believing and unbelieving Jews (Israel) at the 2nd Coming, prior to and independent of the judgment of the Gentiles (which happens in Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus' judgment of the Gentiles there is based on their reception of "My brethren." "My brethren" must refer to a 3rd group present at the end of the tribulation (not Gentile believers and not Gentile unbelievers), since Gentiles are the objects of the "sheep and goats" judgment. Israel is the most natural (and only other) group who Jesus could be referring to in the context. The judgment of Israel (both believing Jews and unbelieving Jews) appears to be an appropriate "missing piece." But what about the ideas within the parable?

A Clue in the Use of the Term "Servant"

If we understand that both the good servant and the evil servant refer to the same thing, that knowledge alone will not be enough to help us identify the "servant." Many interpreters have recognized this single servant and still arrived at different interpretations. Several interpretations argue that, because of the use of the term "servant" and the fact that the

servant was given responsibility, the servant could *only* refer to a *believer*.¹ But is this a sound argument? Since we know that Matthew is steeped in Old Testament allusions, can we find help there concerning who that “servant” might be? Well YES, as a matter of fact...

Jesus’ mother Mary, who would have known the Old Testament well, refers to *the nation of Israel as a whole* after she receives the promise that she will conceive Jesus:

- **Luke 1:54-55:** *54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever.”*

Was this idea unique to Mary, or did she get it from her knowledge of the Old Testament? Here are just a few places we discover when we look:

- **Isaiah 41: 8-10:** *8 “But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend. 9 You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its farthest regions, And said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away: 10 Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’*
- **Isaiah 44:1-2:** *1 “Yet hear me now, O Jacob My servant, And Israel whom I have chosen. 2 Thus says the LORD who made you And formed you from the womb, who will help you: ‘Fear not, O Jacob My servant’ ...*
- **Isaiah 44:21:** *21 “Remember these, O Jacob, And Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me!*
- **Jeremiah 30:10-11:** *10 ‘Therefore do not fear, O My servant Jacob,’ says the LORD, ‘Nor be dismayed, O Israel; For behold, I will save you from afar, And your seed from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, have rest and be quiet, And no one shall make him afraid. 11 For I am with you,’ says the LORD, ‘to save you; Though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, Yet I will not make a complete end of you. But I will correct you in justice, And will not let you go altogether unpunished.’*

It should be clear that while the nation of Israel was often referred to as God’s “servant,” “My Servant Israel” was made up of *both believers and unbelievers*. Beyond that, the last quote has as the context of its prophecy *Israel in the end times*. Jeremiah 30 is specifically about the “time of Jacob’s trouble” (the same as “Daniel’s 70th week” in Daniel 9), which would place it directly in line with the ideas of our context of Matthew... And Jesus has been speaking about that very time (the tribulation) *immediately preceding* this parable. Israel will be made up of believers and unbelievers throughout the tribulation, but Israel *as a nation* will be given the *responsibility and privilege* to help each other and to proclaim the “gospel of the kingdom to all the nations” (Matthew 24:14), in order to offer salvation to the world. Whether or not they fulfill their responsibilities will depend on their individual choices to either (1) trust their Messiah and prepare for His arrival, or (2) reject their Messiah, which will leave them *unprepared* for His arrival. We will see from this parable (and from the others in the series) that *believing* (and therefore *preparing*) Israel will receive entrance into the kingdom *and rewards*, while *unbelieving* Israel will be excluded from the kingdom and experience God’s wrath (as seen in Jeremiah 30:11, speaking about the tribulation).

¹ This *theological* argument would lead someone, because of the lack of necessary context, to argue for either the Arminian view or the Free Grace/Wilkin view (discussed on the first page).

More Clues from Other Terms in the Parable

Based on what we've discussed so far, you can see that I believe this parable is pointing to the judgment of Israel (both believing/"good" Israel and unbelieving/"evil" Israel) at the end of the tribulation. While for some that might be difficult to hear (because we're taught that "the New Testament is *all about the church*"), I think the interpretation fits based on several lines of evidence (so far):

- The focus on Israel throughout the Gospel of Matthew – start to finish
- The focus on Israel's "preparation" or "readiness" for the Messiah and His kingdom, beginning in Matthew 3 (and the tribulation is their *next* opportunity to "prepare" for their King's arrival and rule)
- The context of the parable, which is sandwiched *right in between* discussions of the tribulation and the judgment of the Gentiles
- The use of the term "servant" (*who can be either good or evil*), which would have been a natural allusion to Old Testament Israel (and especially since that term is used by both Isaiah and Jeremiah in tribulation contexts)

But what more can we see in this parable that will help us interpret? Let's look at each of the ideas and walk them through. First, if this parable is about the judgment of Israel in the tribulation, then when the "Master comes" who gave them their responsibility during Daniel's 70th week (Daniel 9), then he will reward believing Israel for their *faithfulness* in carrying out their mission of "preparation" for His return. They will be "watching" *because* they have trusted in Him as their Messiah and will be waiting for His return. At the same time, He will judge unbelieving Israel and justly condemn them to hell.²

But there are a few more terms/ideas which help us with an interpretation. When Jesus mentions that He will make a faithful/good servant "ruler over all his goods," this speaks of rewards and authority in the kingdom, which would have been understood by His audience. When Jesus uses the phrase "the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of," you might initially hear "rapture" there, but think about *exactly* what Jesus said. It is the master of *that servant* who comes when he's not expecting; the master who *made him ruler over his household*. This would not fit an unbelieving Gentile.³ In the context of the 2nd Coming, the "servant" who has been given responsibility "over his master's house" will only work with "unbelieving Israel". Even though they have been chosen to represent Him, unbelieving Israel *will not be looking* for His return *because they will not believe in Him* as their Messiah.

Two more terms to go and we will be done. Some try to argue that the "punishment" here is for *unfaithful believers*, and argue that the term "hypocrite" means "unfaithful Christian." If we simply consider Jesus' use of "hypocrite," however, this argument is easily dismissed. In our last lesson, when we looked at Jesus' indictments of the scribes and Pharisees (in Matthew 23), we saw that *seven times* there Jesus refers to them as *hypocrites*. In that passage, he says that

² For further discussion of the judgment of Israel at the end of the tribulation, see: Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology. Vol. 4*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993. In his discussion of the major judgments and their chronology, he discusses Israel's future judgment and gives two major Old Testament prophetic texts as evidence: Ezekiel 20:33-44 and Malachi 3:2-6.

³ It is obviously true, however, that unbelievers will not be *looking* for Christ *at the rapture*, nor will they be *aware* that He is coming. That will be true for unbelievers at both the rapture and the 2nd Coming.

those “hypocrites” will not “escape the condemnation of hell” and calls them “sons of hell”. It is important to see that, *one chapter earlier*, Jesus calls those *unbelieving Jewish leaders* “hypocrites” and condemns them to *hell* (not just “punishment”). Wouldn’t it be a radical shift for Jesus to *completely change His meaning* from one chapter to the next (and in the same Olivet Discourse)? If Jesus is allowed to be consistent in His use of the term, then “appointing him a portion with the hypocrites” means that these unbelieving Jews (“that evil servant”) will go to the same place that “the hypocrites” in chapter 23 went... “And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!”

Beyond that, we can see in the parallel passage in **Luke 12:46** a clarification of what is meant by “hypocrites”: “...appoint him his portion with the **unbelievers**.” Here again it is clear that “hypocrite” equals “unbeliever.” In fact, hypocrite = unbeliever = son of hell...

Finally, what about when Jesus says that the evil servant will be “cut in two”? While most commentators feel the need to make that phrase an *exaggeration* or *hyperbole*, I would say we have no such need. Remember the parable’s context in Matthew? This is a judgment of *unbelievers* (specifically pointing to unbelieving Jews here) at the end of the tribulation. What will the end of the tribulation *look like* in terms of Christ’s judgment of His enemies? Before they are judged eternally, what happens to them when Christ returns? If you read Revelation 14 and the second half of Revelation 19, you should have a pretty good idea! There are two *instruments of death* mentioned in those passages, both targeting unbelievers: a *sickle* (Revelation 14) and a *sword* (Revelation 19). And Who will be carrying those weapons when He comes to judge those unbelievers? Christ the King! “Cut him in two?” Yes. Unbelievers at the end of the tribulation (whether Jews or Gentiles) will be judged physically (they will be slaughtered!) and *then* judged eternally. If you read Jeremiah 30 in its entirety, you can see that even though Israel is God’s “servant”, they may be subject to His punishment if they are unbelieving/evil.

Conclusions

And now that we have established the consistency of the ideas in the interpretation, what can we take away from it? While the parable has a single meaning, are there applications we can draw from it, even if it’s “not about us”? Certainly. While we need to be careful not to make any faulty analogies, I think there are some parallels that we can apply:

- We too are called to watch and be ready for Jesus’ soon return in several places in the New Testament. While we are accountable for our choices, the difference between Israel and the church is that those who “have been given a stewardship” as “the church” are *not* a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. The church, the Bride of Christ, is made up only of believers. Unlike Israel who will be looking for the return of their Messiah to rule as King, we are waiting for the return of our Groom to take us to the place He has prepared for us!
- We too (the church) can anticipate rewards for our faithfulness to the Lord (2 Cor. 5:10).
- Unbelievers (whether Jewish or Gentile) can expect eternal punishment based on their rejection of the Lord Jesus, the Messiah and Coming King.
- Unbelievers (both Jew and Gentile) *will not be expecting Jesus to return...* That is true for both the rapture and the 2nd Coming. Unbelievers will be caught off guard in both events.
- Jesus the King WILL RETURN to reward believers, punish unbelievers and rule the earth!

The Context of the Parable of the 10 Virgins

The Parable of the 10 Virgins (found in Matthew 25:1-13) has suffered much abuse at the hands of interpreters, just like we saw in the prior lesson concerning the Good/Evil Servant parable. And for the same reasons: it is treated in isolation, the Jewish context is ignored, the Matthean context and audience are ignored, and the concepts/ideas within the parable are either unknown or ignored. This occurs most often as the result of someone taking their prior assumptions (their “lens”) and interpreting simply based on those assumptions. The results, however, could not be more obvious. The variety of interpretations of this parable is just about like walking into an ice cream shop: you pick your flavor based on your tastes... The major lines of interpretation, however, line up with those discussed in the last lesson (The Parable of the Good/Evil Servant), so I won’t repeat them here.

In order to get a better grip of the context, let’s take a look at a few of the things we have learned from Matthew (in prior lessons) that might help us:

- Matthew (uniquely) uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” to focus on *God’s reign upon the earth* (which from a Christian perspective we would refer to as “the millennium”). We can see this if we simply trace Matthew’s quotes back to the Old Testament. There it becomes clear that Matthew is writing primarily to Jewish people who would have understood all the connections.
- John the Baptist (in Matthew 3), Jesus (in Matthew 4) and the disciples (in Matthew 10) offered this *kingdom of heaven* to Israel IF they would “prepare the way of the LORD”. Notice the word “prepare” in there?
- While we know that Israel as a nation rejected their Messiah (and therefore His kingdom) during His 1st time on earth, we’ve seen through our studies that God is *not* finished with Israel yet, and Jesus will return in the future and establish His kingdom here on earth (and rule for a thousand years!).
- During the future tribulation (Daniel’s 70th week, Daniel 9:23-27), Israel will again be called upon to “Prepare the way of the LORD” before His return to establish the Messianic Kingdom. In that case, however, their *responsibility* will be to proclaim that “gospel of the kingdom” to *all the nations* (Gentiles) in preparation for Jesus’ return (Matthew 24:14).

Keep these ideas in mind as we move forward. But before we look more closely at our parable in Matthew 25, let’s look at the origins of John the Baptist’s message from Isaiah 40:

- **Isaiah 40:3-11:** *3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; 5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” 6 The voice said, “Cry out!” And he said, “What shall I cry?” “All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.” 9 O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” 10 Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work (recompense) before Him. 11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He*

will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.

From this quote of the larger context of Isaiah 40, we can see that Israel will be called upon to *proclaim* the arrival of the “glory of the LORD” (which Jesus just mentioned in Matthew 24:30, by the way...) and to *be prepared* for His arrival. While Jesus and His kingdom were rejected when offered to Israel the 1st time, they will still be given that “70th week” in the future to “prepare the way of the LORD”. We also know from Jeremiah 30 and Malachi 3 that they will be held accountable for their response (Jeremiah 30:1-11, specifically about Israel in the tribulation, the “time of Jacob’s trouble”). So, could this parable, like the prior parable in Matthew 24:45-51, be referring to Israel’s responsibility and accountability prior to the arrival of Messiah to establish His reign upon the earth? While I think that you can already hear me saying “Yes” to that question, let’s look more at the context in Matthew and some of its ideas before drawing any conclusions too quickly... (*I also know it’s really difficult for “church” people not to insert the Church into every passage in the New Testament, but I hope you will avoid that temptation just long enough to examine the evidence!*)

The Importance of the Context of the Parable of the 10 Virgins

While this parable is most often taught (and interpreted) in isolation, it is important to note that this parable in Matthew is actually the 2nd in a series of 3 that Jesus is teaching to make His “point”. If they were trying to “do” what Jesus was telling them, they would have heard both of the commands and the ideas leading up to the three parables: “Watch” (verse 42) and “be ready” (verse 44). Verse 43, referring to the “master of the house” (Israel, which could be either believers or unbelievers), is written in such a way that it assumes Israel’s failure to be ready for the “thief” (Jesus in the Rapture). The result of their failure to be ready for the Rapture would mean that they would face Israel’s judgment at the end of the tribulation (see Luke 21:36). If they had been watching, they would have been taken by Jesus as part of the Church. But before we discuss further details, let’s (finally) look at the parable:

- **Matthew 25:1-13:** *1 “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. 3 Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, 4 but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. 5 But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. 6 “And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ 7 Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ 10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. 11 “Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ 12 But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ 13 “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.*

Beyond these verses, there is more for us to see here in the immediate context, given the fact that this parable is part of a set or series. Let me point out some of the details:

1. The 1st parable (the Good/Evil Servant) is also told in a different place in Luke.
2. The 2nd and 3rd parables (the 10 Virgins and the Talents) occur *only* in Matthew.
3. *Only* the 10 Virgins (which is *only* in Matthew) begins with “the kingdom of heaven is like...” Hmmm... (the Talents parable inserts the phrase in English with good reason, although it’s

not technically there.) This is also the *last time* in Matthew that the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is used.

4. Matthew is the *only* place (obviously) where these 3 parables are given in a *series*. This is for the purpose of coherence, in order to clarify Jesus’ meaning.
5. While Jesus’ purpose was not to make every detail in these parables line up with a future event, the main “symbols” should at least line up in a way that makes sense and is consistent with Jesus’ focus.
6. All 3 parables are found in Matthew *AFTER* Jesus’ discussion of the tribulation and 2nd Coming, and *BEFORE* Jesus’ discussion of the judgment of the Gentiles (the sheep and goats judgment), which initiates the Messianic Kingdom (see Matthew 13:41-43).
7. In *all* 3 parables, *all* the main participants are given a *responsibility*, and are accountable for the responsibility that they have been given. This, we will discover, is important to see when aiming at a proper interpretation.

All of those details should help us “place” the 10 Virgins parable in its proper context. With all of that detail, I haven’t even mentioned the Jewish wedding yet! So here we go...

Help from the Allusion to the Ancient Jewish Wedding

While this is a clear allusion to the ancient Jewish wedding, it’s important to note that the elements of a Jewish wedding would not necessarily have been known by Gentiles at the time.⁴ That’s because it was a *Jewish* wedding, right?! Forgive my sarcasm, but what I hope you’ll realize is that *there is a reason* why this parable is told ONLY IN MATTHEW. Matthew assumes (as Jesus does) that his audience will be familiar with allusions and references to Jewish revelation (the Old Testament) *and* Jewish culture. So, if we have learned the main ideas regarding the Jewish wedding, how do they help us here? First of all, they should help us see that the focus of the parable is whether or not the “virgins” were *ready to go into* the “wedding”. In terms of the elements of the ancient Jewish wedding, this most naturally points to the feast that took place *after* the Groom and His bride returned from their “honeymoon”. All of the various parties involved in the wedding, as well as all their invited guests, would enter a large hall and enjoy food, dancing and fellowship in honor of the Groom and His bride. While this lines the parable up very well with its context (the end of the tribulation/establishment of the kingdom), the allusion to the wedding should also help us to conclude several other things:

- The 10 Virgins are NOT the Bride. In fact, there are 10 of them, which should make it clear that their role in the wedding feast would not have anything to do with marrying the Groom (unless you argue for polygamy). While you might think that’s pretty obvious, many who argue strongly that the Church is the “bride of Christ” also try to argue that the Virgins are about the Church. That’s not only NOT a good fit, it’s incoherent!
- All 10 Virgins are given a *special privilege and a special responsibility* within the context of the wedding. While many argue for this as a general reference to believers and unbelievers, all 10 *knew* their responsibility. And those 10 would not be the only guests invited to the wedding! There would be MANY guests (like we saw in Matthew 22), but the Virgins here had a *special privilege and status*. In the ancient Jewish wedding, there were often dances and special entertainment as part of the celebration. Since the feast usually occurred at night, one of the dances was called a *torch dance*, and it was performed by the young girls

⁴ For a full discussion of the elements of the ancient Jewish wedding, please see my notes in “The Jewish Wedding and Matthew’s Gospel.”

("virgins" or young maidens) in the community. This would have required them to have a sufficient supply of oil. Notice **Jeremiah 31:4**, which is found in a prophecy regarding Israel's regathering and the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom: "*Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel! You shall again be adorned with your tambourines, And shall go forth in the dances of those who rejoice.*" Do you think there might be a connection?!

- In order to accomplish their given responsibility (be *ready to go in*), they needed oil for their lamps. Whatever else we can note about this parable, it is clear that Jesus considered their lack of oil enough to exclude them from entering the wedding feast. While some argue that they simply *didn't have enough oil*, the Greek (and most English versions) of Jesus' statement clearly states that they brought NO oil (verse 3). If (as I believe) the "oil" is a symbol for the Holy Spirit, it would be incorrect (therefore) to say that they didn't have "enough" of the Holy Spirit. These 10 Virgins either had the Holy Spirit or they didn't. They were (therefore) either believers or unbelievers, and either (1) entered the kingdom/feast because they believed and had the Holy Spirit, or (2) did not believe, did not have the Holy Spirit and so could not enter the kingdom/feast.

Help from the use of the term "Virgins"

Let's pursue the question of the identity of the "virgins," which is variously understood, as you probably already know... In our last lesson, we saw that "servant" was a symbol used to refer to *Israel* by several of the Old Testament prophets. That is important because (as we've already studied) Matthew assumes (as does Jesus) that his Jewish audience is familiar with those prophets and Jewish history and culture. But can we say the same thing about the term "virgin" here? While it is clearly an allusion to a special group in a wedding, does it *also* have a *helpful* allusion to Israel? Let's go back to those same Old Testament prophets and see:

- **Isaiah 37:22-23:** *22 ...this is the word which the LORD has spoken concerning him: "The virgin, the daughter of Zion, Has despised you, laughed you to scorn; The daughter of Jerusalem Has shaken her head behind your back! 23 "Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice, And lifted up your eyes on high? Against the Holy One of Israel.*
- **Jeremiah 14:15-17:** *15 Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in My name, whom I did not send, and who say, 'Sword and famine shall not be in this land' - 'By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed! 16 And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; they will have no one to bury them - them nor their wives, their sons nor their daughters—for I will pour their wickedness on them.' 17 "Therefore you shall say this word to them: 'Let my eyes flow with tears night and day, And let them not cease; For the virgin daughter of my people Has been broken with a mighty stroke, with a very severe blow.*
- **Jeremiah 18:13:** *13 Therefore thus says the LORD: "Ask now among the Gentiles, Who has heard such things? The virgin of Israel has done a very horrible thing.*
- **Jeremiah 31:3-4:** *3 The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you. 4 Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel! You shall again be adorned with your tambourines, And shall go forth in the dances of those who rejoice.*
- **Jeremiah 31:21:** *21 "Set up signposts, Make landmarks; Set your heart toward the highway, The way in which you went. Turn back, O virgin of Israel, Turn back to these your cities.*

- **Lamentations 2:13:** *13 How shall I console you? To what shall I liken you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I compare with you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is spread wide as the sea; Who can heal you?*
- **Joel 1:6-8:** *6 For a nation has come up against My land, Strong, and without number; His teeth are the teeth of a lion, And he has the fangs of a fierce lion. 7 He has laid waste My vine, And ruined My fig tree; He has stripped it bare and thrown it away; Its branches are made white. 8 Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth For the husband of her youth.*
- **Amos 5:1-2:** *1 Hear this word which I take up against you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: 2 The virgin of Israel has fallen; She will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; There is no one to raise her up.*

These passages should be sufficient to show that several Old Testament prophets did indeed use the symbol of a “virgin” to speak about *Israel*. With all the other pieces of the puzzle fitting together, it is easy to see how a Jewish audience would have understood this as referring to *Israel*, especially since the 10 Virgins parable is only found in the most Jewish of gospels.

While this should help us fill in the pieces of the puzzle correctly, are you seeing yet how perfectly this parable fits into its context? If not, let’s take some time to walk through it, now that we’ve considered the context and the ideas around it.

Putting it all together

Jesus uses the illustration of 10 Virgins to (again) demonstrate the importance of Israel’s “readiness” or “preparation” for their Messiah (the 2nd Coming). Both the term “servant” and “virgin” would have been natural allusions to Israel for Matthew’s (Jewish) audience. Because it is about Israel, both the wise virgins (Jewish believers) and the unwise virgins (Jewish unbelievers) can be called “virgins.” The virgins have been given a special responsibility within the wedding feast, and they needed to be “ready” to enter. This responsibility required them to have a supply of oil. Since “oil” is a common allusion to the Holy Spirit, this means that Jews in the tribulation will need to have the Holy Spirit in order to enter into the wedding feast, which occurs when Messiah as the Bridegroom returns to establish His kingdom here on earth. Those who are “ready to go in” will have the Holy Spirit, and so will be looking for (and ready for) their Messiah. Those who *have no oil* will be unbelieving Jews who will not be looking for their Messiah; they will be unprepared for His return, and so will not be allowed to enter the wedding feast. They will be excluded, which means they will not enter into the millennium (And recognize that the millennium represents only *the 1st 1000 years of eternity* and the King’s reign!). The Jewish unbelievers’ lack of oil (the Holy Spirit) will prevent them from being “ready to enter,” and will lead to the Bridegroom (Jesus) locking them out and saying, “I don’t know you!” While the Bride (the Church), the wise virgins (believing Israel) and the sheep (believing Gentiles at the end of the tribulation) will enjoy entry into the feast/kingdom/millennium/eternity/heaven (All of that! Amen!), the unwise virgins (unbelieving Israel) will fail to enter because they didn’t “prepare” by obtaining “oil” (the Holy Spirit) in time for the celebration.

Conclusions

This parable (along with the others in the series) is *preceded* by a long discussion of future events (Matthew 24:1-41, about *the tribulation*). The series is then *followed* by another future event, *the sheep and goats judgment of the Gentiles* at the end of the tribulation (Matthew 25:31-45). Those who believe in a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church are usually quick to *EXCLUDE the Church* from Jesus’ discussion of the tribulation in Matthew 24:4-34. The rapture

would bring the Church to stand before Jesus at the *Bema*, or “judgment seat of Christ” (see 2 Corinthians 5:10). This same group (including me!), therefore, is quick to *EXCLUDE the Church* from the judgment of the Gentiles at the end of the tribulation (Matthew 25:31-46). Why, then, is the Church so quick to *INCLUDE* itself into the parables which fall *RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE?! We do that because we come to the text (in isolation) based on our theology, NOT because of the context... These parables fit perfectly into Jesus’ discussion concerning Israel, the tribulation and the judgments at the end of the tribulation when the Messianic Kingdom (the “millennium”) is established. To insert the Church into these parables ignores pretty much everything in this context! The Church will be gone before these parables take place...*

In the beginning of Matthew 24, Jesus discusses the tribulation in detail *independently of whether or not his listeners will be there for it*. After the 3 parables, Jesus discusses the judgment of the Gentiles *independently of whether or not his listeners will be there for it*. Why should He not be allowed to talk about the judgment of Israel at the end of the tribulation (using the 3 parables) in the same way? Jesus is discussing the importance of *Israel’s readiness just like He has discussed the prior and following events...*

Understanding this as referring to the future judgment of Israel at the end of the tribulation corresponds beautifully with all the prophetic allusions (including Isaiah 40 and Jeremiah 30-31) to Israel’s future *regathering, responsibility, accountability, judgment and future blessing*. These parables’ focus on “readiness” and “preparation” fit the 2nd Coming of the Messiah well. Beyond that, they also fit with all the proclamations for Israel to “prepare the way of the LORD” *which were rejected by Israel* in Jesus’ 1st Coming (see Matthew 3, 4 and 10 especially). In other words, they fit well with the broader context of Matthew and his focus on Israel’s call to *be ready* for their King and Messiah to come and establish His kingdom. By the way, read Jeremiah 31:1-14 and prepare to be blessed by how many things you see that line up with this parable...

So, what applications can we as the “Bride of Christ” (the Church) draw from this parable? In other words, once we understand the meaning, what can we apply in spite of the fact that it is focused on Israel and her future judgment? Here are a few of the things I would argue are helpful applications:

- The Church as the Bride of Christ is *ALSO* called to be ready and watch for the return of her Groom and Savior. In our case, however, our *faith* has already sealed our marriage, and there is no question *anywhere* in the Bible that the *Bride* will be at her own wedding feast!
- Those who watch and prepare for the return of their Lord, whether “Virgin” or “Bride”, are those who have believed the message that He is indeed coming! We watch and prepare for His return *because* we have believed...
- Even if someone doesn’t want to see the Virgins as a reference to Israel in the tribulation, the fact that 5 of the Virgins “brought NO oil” should lead us to conclude that those 5 did not have *ANY* “oil” to get them into the kingdom feast, a pretty clear reference to the Holy Spirit. They were, therefore, *unbelievers*. To try to argue that they simply “didn’t have enough” is a contradiction of Jesus’ plain language.
- If we are simply speaking about “oil,” independent of the context, we know that *EVERYONE* who enters the wedding feast will need that “oil” to enter! There will be no entry into God’s presence without the Holy Spirit’s presence and power.