

Learning to Think Biblically

Learning to read the gospels rightly is a lifelong challenge. There's an incredible depth and meaning to them that we're not well-equipped to read. We're equipped to read the Sermon on the Mount separately from the Sermon on the Mount of Olives.

Learning to think biblically requires different reading skills, and Matthew has given us a great system. If we follow his structure it will open up a deeper meaning. As Einstein said, God is in the details, and we must realize that in reading biblical narratives the details matter. This is true for all four gospels. One needs to look for patterns of repetition. If Jesus taught about a lamp earlier, and then uses the lamp image again, is there a relationship?

Consider Matthew chapter 25, the Olivet Discourse, where Matthew gives the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

The kingdom of heaven shall be compared to 10 maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. For 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, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight, there was a cry, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those maidens who rose and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish said to the wise, give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out, but the wise replied, perhaps there will not be enough for us. And for you go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came and those who were ready, went in with him to the marriage feast and the door was shut afterward. The other maidens came saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. And he replied truly. I say to you, I do not know you. Watch, therefore for, you know, neither the day nor the hour.

What elements stand out in this parable? Bridesmaids, oil, the lamps, a bridegroom.

Specifically, what does the oil represent? Common answers include anointing, grace, salvation, Holy Spirit, etc. All are all good biblical guesses, but all are wrong.

What does it mean that the five foolish virgins run out of oil?

How must we think to find the answer? We have to learn to think biblically. Matthew set this symbol up and assumes that you understand it. Jesus is assuming you can understand the symbolism.

Where does this portion of the gospel come from? The Olivet Discourse, which is parallel to The Sermon on the Mount. So, the Sermon on the Mount would be the secret to unlocking the meaning in the Olivet Discourse, and the Olivet Discourse would be the secret to unlocking the meaning in the Sermon on the Mount. Look at Matthew chapters five through seven and look for clues.

From the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, one of the key images is found in Matthew 5:14,

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house."

Jesus interprets what the light signifies in the next verse.

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works.”

The light signifies good work. We're called to be light, and the light that shines from us as Christians are to be our good works.

What does it mean that the five foolish virgins run out of oil? They run out of good works. How can we say this? What kind of banquet is it? A wedding. In one word, what sort of good works are associated with a wedding? So, if you run out of love, you miss the bridegroom. The five wise virgins are those who have continued to be a light through continuing to do good deeds, and the good works are love.

We also get the idea of lamp with good works in 6:22 of the Sermon the Mount in the center.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness indeed?”

This also relates to Proverbs 22:9, the idea of the evil eye. The good eye is the one who sees the poor and gives to them in their needs. Whereas the evil eye is the one who is selfish and doesn't give.

And so, the overall idea is that of the lamp being the eye of the body, in other words, the *eye is the lamp* are the good deeds that you're called to do as the light for your path. A Hebrew idea of the good eye versus the bad eye is found in Deuteronomy 15:9:

Don't let your eye hostile to your poor brother, but open your hand, generously to him.

When you see a panhandler, the first thing we usually do is to look away. That's the evil or hostile eye in the Old Testament. The idea is to look at the need and have compassion. To look away is to refuse compassion.

Further, Jesus divides five foolish and five wise virgins. This is also a clue as to the meaning of the parable. Where else do we get Jesus making a division between wise and foolish? In Matthew 7:24 we see Jesus dividing the foolish and the wise:

He who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who builds his house upon the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came and the winds blew and beat upon the house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them is like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand. And the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

So, the difference between the wise man and the foolish man at the end of the Sermon on the Mount is he who hears these words and does them. Note that both the foolish and the wise hear the word of God, but the wise enacts it.

Just as Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount with a wise man and a fool, now he begins the sermon on the Mount of Olives with the idea of a wise and foolish, and now he has five foolish women, five wise women.

Once again, the number five is the clue that one should look for the image of in light of the Sermon on the Mount in light of this. Note also what happens to the foolish when they knock at the door? What does the Lord say?

They say, "Lord, Lord, open the door for us." They call Jesus as Lord. Oh, a great profession of faith. But they're not allowed into the banquet. Earlier, in Matthew 7:21, we had a similar warning about that.

"Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

So, the wedding banquet is the kingdom of heaven.

Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord shall enter, Jesus says, in Matthew seven, verse 21, shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, do we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do mighty works in your name. And then I will declare to them. I never knew you, depart from me evil doers.

What does the bridegroom say to the five foolish virgins?

"I do not know you."

Unlocking the parable of the five foolish and the five wise virgins depends on the earlier teaching of Jesus.

We must change our habits when we read the gospels. When one reads modern literature, modern writers follow the old journalistic adage: Tell him what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them. It's writing for idiots. So, everything you've read has been written as if you were an idiot. In the biblical writings, they're writing as if you are a disciple who's listening, who's hearing carefully, holding in memory, and **looking for patterns**.