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“The Ten Virgins” by Jorge Cocco

HOW DOES THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS OFFER US DIRECTION IN LIFE?

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.”

Matthew 25:1

THE KNOW

As Jesus delivered the Olivet Discourse found in Matthew 24–25, He told His disciples a parable about “ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish” (Matthew 25:1–2). This parable immediately follows somber warnings of the events that will precede the destruction of Jerusalem as well as Jesus’s eventual return to the earth. Thus, this parable is best understood in the context of Jesus’s direction to “watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Matthew 24:42).

In the parable, ten virgins waited for a bridegroom to come and pick up his bride. Consequently, this parable “describes real wedding practices in ancient Israel.”¹ John and Jeannie Welch explained “The bridegroom and his friends would come to get the bride at her house. There the bridesmaids would honor the couple and accompany the party to the place where the wedding ceremony and feast would be held.”² These bridesmaids carried small, lit oil lamps as they followed the groom and bride.

However, only five of the virgins were wise and brought enough oil for their lamps and an additional small reserve. The other five virgins did not bring any reserve, so when the groom delayed, they found that they did not have enough oil to last the night. When someone called out, “Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him,” these virgins first had to go and buy additional oil before arriving late to the wedding feast, where they were ultimately denied entry (see Matthew 25:6–12).

Scholars have noted that the olive oil used for these lamps could hold many meanings. For example, John Tvedtnes once noted, “In both scripture and early Christian tradition, olive oil is symbolic of the Holy Ghost. This is because the Holy Ghost provides spiritual nourishment, enlightenment, and comfort, just as olive oil in the ancient Near East was used for food, light, and anointing.”³ Furthermore, early Jewish and Christian traditions link olive trees with the tree of life in Eden, thus giving olive oil sacred properties related to eternal life.⁴

When the olive oil is seen from this perspective, the parable takes on a new meaning and gives context to the wise virgins' refusal to share their precious oil with their friends (see Matthew 25:9). The five wise virgins not only had enough olive oil to fill their lamps but also carried extra with them in a vessel. In other words, these five virgins had the light-giving guide of the Holy Ghost with them, and they were prepared to continually have His influence guide their actions as the bridegroom came.⁵

Such a reading is also supported in modern revelation. In Doctrine and Covenants 45, the Lord revealed that the parable would be fulfilled “when I shall come in my glory,” stating that “they that are wise . . . have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:56–57).

Later, the Lord also compared the wise and foolish virgins to the righteous and wicked: “And until that hour there will be foolish virgins among the wise; and at that hour cometh an entire separation of the righteous and the wicked” (Doctrine and Covenants 63:54). The Lord makes it clear in His revelations to the Prophet Joseph Smith that in order to be seen as one of the wise virgins in this parable, we are to receive the gospel, maintain the presence of the Holy Ghost, and continue in good works.

The foolish virgins, simply stated, are those who have not prepared adequately to enter the Lord's presence when He comes again. They did not maintain the presence of the Holy Ghost in their lives and waited until it was too late to repent and seek His presence. Because of this, the Lord said to them, “Verily I say unto you, Ye know me not” (JST, Matthew 25:12).

The theme of entering the Lord's presence at the last day is present in other parables uttered by Jesus. One such parable is found in Matthew 22 and is often called the parable of the marriage feast. In this parable, the Second Coming is again related to a wedding celebration. When certain individuals either reject the invitation to come to celebrate or arrive having rejected the wedding garment offered by the king, they are cast out of the Lord's presence (see Matthew 22:2–12).⁶

Both the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the marriage feast make it clear that we need to be anxiously engaged in good works. We cannot hope to enter the presence of the Lord if we are ill-prepared and have not repented of our sins. As noted by the Welch's, “[b]oth of these parables are thus cautionary tales to all disciples: look

to your own life and behaviors, and be anxiously engaged in good causes of your own free will and choice.”⁷

THE WHY

The parable of the ten virgins gives us careful instructions about preparing for the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we cannot know with certainty how events will play out, we have been told what to expect leading up to that joyous event. Hence, the Savior instructs us to “watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 25:13).

As we continue to prepare for the Second Coming, we see in this parable and the parable of the marriage feast dire warnings against those who have not lived in a way fitting of eternal life. Those who come ill-prepared and improperly clothed will not be allowed into the Lord's presence. We need oil of the Holy Ghost to light our way and guide us into the Lord's welcoming embrace.

As noted by President Russell M. Nelson, there is no more fitting time that this parable relates to than the present. He warned that “in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”⁸ When we prepare by striving to follow the Lord's commandments and to do His will, we will be blessed with an increased capacity to recognize the will of the Lord in our lives. Then we will be able to fill our lamps with the pure oil that comes through faith in Christ and keeping His commandments.

FURTHER READING

John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 140–149.

John A. Tvedtnes, “Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 427–459.

David A. Bednar, “Put On Thy Strength, O Zion,” October 2022 general conference.

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NOTES

1. John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 142.
2. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 142.

3. John A. Tvedtnes, “Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 427.
4. See Tvedtnes, “Olive Oil,” 429–430.
5. See Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 142.
6. This parable was recently discussed by David A. Bednar, “Put On Thy Strength, O Zion,” October 2022 general conference.
7. Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 145.
8. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” April 2018 general conference.