

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

On March 22, 2012, we received the following inquiry:

“What is the oil of the lamp Matthew 25:4, and what are the talents 25:15.”

To the author, we thank you for your inquiry. It appears that you are diligently searching Jesus’ words for understanding. That is commendable. However, there is need for some caution when we are looking at parables. Let’s first consider what a parable is and how Jesus used them, as well as what a parable is not.

A parable as used by Jesus was a method of teaching a multitude of people of varying intellects and temperaments. It is hard to speak different words for each class of hearer, but you can tell a story to convey your teaching and each group, even each individual, will be able to make his own interpretation in accordance with his or her own intellectual and spiritual endowments.

Parables stimulates the imagination, challenge the discrimination and provoke critical thinking. They promote sympathy without arousing antagonism and they evade much prejudice, putting new truth gracefully into the mind, all without provoking self-defense or personal resentment. They enable the teacher to present new and even startling truths while at the same time largely avoiding all controversy and outward clashing with tradition and established authority. Thus, parables are an effective teaching tool, but not expressions of direct truth.

And although parables are often confused with allegories, all parables are not allegorical. Allegories are stories where **each** feature has some hidden meaning. And when we seek to interpret an allegory, we give a precise meaning to each element. It is important to understand that Jesus did not give allegories; he gave parables.

Nevertheless, when we are interpreting parables for the purpose of making some specific point, we are **allowed** to “allegorize” them, but we must understanding that the interpretation we give is only instructive – not absolute truth.

For example, in **Letter No. 4** and **Letter No. 5** in “**The Seven Letters to the Seven Congregation**” we used two parables, and presented them in an allegorical fashion. We made the point Jesus was intending to convey without greatly offending anyone. The interpretation illustrated the need for all anointed Christians to accept their brothers. That was the point of the parable and the audience we were writing to understood that point and, we are told, gained a great deal of benefit from it. Now, with that in mind, let’s address your question.

Because “oil” is a common word and “talent” as used in Bible times referred to a monetary unit, we suspect you are asking us how are we to interpret those terms as utilized in the

parables. Keeping in mind what we explained above about the purpose and use of parables, we will first show you what is the purpose of the parable – the lesson Jesus was teaching. The parable reads:

“Then the kingdom of the heavens **will become like** ten virgins that took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were discreet. For **the foolish took their lamps but took no oil with them**, whereas **the discreet took oil in their receptacles with their lamps**. While the bridegroom was delaying, they all nodded and went to sleep. Right **in the middle of the night there arose a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Be on your way out to meet him.’** Then all those virgins rose and put their lamps in order. The foolish said to the discreet, ‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are about to go out.’ The discreet answered with the words, ‘Perhaps there may not be quite enough for us and you. Be on your way, instead, to those who sell it and buy for yourselves.’ **While they were going off to buy, the bridegroom arrived**, and the virgins that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterwards the rest of the virgins also came, saying, ‘Sir, sir, open to us!’ In answer he said, ‘I tell you the truth, I do not know you.’ **“Keep on the watch, therefore, because you know neither the day nor the hour.”**” – *Matthew 25:1-14*

The lesson Jesus was teaching is set forth in the last verse: stay watchful and do not serve God based on a prescribed day or hour because we do not know when the day or the hour we are waiting for will arrive. According to the Bible, that is what Jesus was teaching – watchfulness and readiness.

Now, if we chose to, we can attempt to “allegorize” the parable and give a title to the five discreet virgins, the five foolish virgins, the oil, the receptacles, the lamps, the bridegroom, the night crier, those who sell oil, the marriage feast, and the shut door. It might be an entertaining and instructive endeavor or it might become a complicated and misguided debacle. Some parables are simply not suitable to be “allegorized.” This may be one of them.

Remember, our challenge as Christians is to get to know Jesus, get to understand what he believed, imitate him, and do the work he commissioned. As you read the parable, what do you think Jesus was trying to tell **YOU**? If the word “oil” stands out in your mind, contemplate that and remain watchful and ready. If the word “virgin” stands out in your mind, contemplate that and remain watchful and ready. If the word “lamp” stands out in your mind, contemplate that and remain watchful and ready, etc.

As to the next parable you referred to in *Matthew 25:14-30* of the “talents” we direct you to our response in **Questions and Responses, dated March 5, 2012**. We did not therein attempt to “allegorize” the parable in all its features, but we were able to glean important and instructive information. We saw the lesson to be: Whatever asset you have that can be used in the Father’s service, use it and be diligent about doing so, because failure to do so will result in great disappointment to you and your future hopes. Notice how this is explained in verse 29 and 30:

“For to everyone that has, more will be given and he will have abundance; but as for him that does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And throw the good-for-nothing slave out into the darkness outside. There is where [his] weeping and the gnashing of [his] teeth will be.” – *Matthew 25:29-30*

Our point is not to screen the gnats, but to focus on the big picture. When considering any parable, try to discern the lesson Jesus was teaching. Engage yourself in the exciting and fulfilling adventure of spiritual insight and growth rather than mere theological understanding.

If you would like more clarification on this issue, please feel free to write again.

Your brothers in the faith.

“Elaia Luchnia”