

*Imaging the Word:
Art and Theology*

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids
(Matthew 25:1-13)



Friedrich Wilhelm Schadow (German, 1789-1862), *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins*, 1838-1842

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said: ¹ “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose 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, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Reflection

In Matthew 25, we come to the final collection of Jesus' teachings and the final chapter of Jesus' parables. For, the three parables found here—the Ten Virgins, the Talents, and the Sheep and Goats—are indeed the capstone of his teaching. Not only are all of the notes Jesus has previously struck present in them; those notes are at last harmonized and given their ultimate expression in the three parables.

What these three parables have in common is that they are all “parables of judgment.” They each present a crisis or decision-making point that has an ultimate consequence, namely exclusion from God's kingdom. It is important to note, though, that in each of these parables, inclusion *precedes* exclusion—any characters that are outsiders at the end of the story always start out as insiders at the beginning.

In the parable before us today, there are ten ‘bridesmaids’ or ‘virgins’ who “took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” Here are ten girls (fourteen-year-olds, say) on their way to a party. They are, presumably, tickled to the point of teenage giggleness at their happy prospects. The immediate crisis—the possibility of their being left out of the wedding, the danger of their receiving a snub rather than an invitation—is overcome at the start, and the bridesmaids see nothing but champagne and dancing from here on out. This is to say, they are all ‘included’ at the start. But that ‘general grace’ is about to be challenged because, Jesus notes, “five of them were foolish and five were wise.”

The only explanation Jesus gives for what makes some of them “wise” and others “foolish” is that “the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps” but “when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them.” This is curious. For, it is not as though the “foolish” girls are totally impractical—they brought their lamps and oil enough for what they would need for the journey. Knowing that they have been invited to a daytime wedding that will last only into the early evening, these bridesmaids reasonably assess their needs and content themselves with taking filled lanterns with them. Nothing could be more sensible. The other five, though, insist on bringing *extra* oil, dragging along milk jugs full of kerosene, just in case. It's gratuitous. Practically speaking, if we saw them in real life, we wouldn't think them wise or prudent, but as neurotics, worrywarts, the belts-and-suspenders kind of people who are preoccupied with what could possibly go wrong. Their abundance of caution seems downright silly.

Knowing how Jesus, and specifically his parables work, we suspect that Jesus is playing with our normal assumptions here, overturning our notions of what it means to be wise and what it means to be foolish. Seeing as Jesus is talking about the “kingdom of God,” we surmise that the “foolish maidens” actually represent the “wisdom of this world”—the live-by-what-you-see prudence that “God has made foolish” in Christ (1 Cor 1:20). The “wise,” on the other hand, represent the wisdom of faith—the wisdom of trusting the foolishness of God in Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:21-25)—the wisdom of living in light of the party to which the Bridegroom has invited us. We might say that the “foolish” young women represent the this-worldly-minded, those who live as though all that matters is what one can achieve or accumulate or control before they die. They are content so long as they have enough to get by or even to get ahead right now, so long as the happy little life they've built for themselves holds out and nothing unforeseeable happens.

The wise young women, by contrast, recognize that the short time we have on earth is passing and that how we live now will have consequences not just in this life, but eternally. It is not enough for them to have enough for now, to be content with this life; they look to the life to come, the life they will have after this one. In actual fact, both sets of girls have all the need for now. But only the “wise” have enough to deal with the presently unseeable and unknowable.

But the point of the story—the point that ultimately shows the “wisdom” of the abundance of caution—is that, in this world, something always does go wrong: “When the bridegroom took his time arriving,” Jesus says. Eventually, after everybody had just about given up, and all the bridesmaids had fallen asleep, the guest of honor shows up. Only, not everyone had prepared, and so his appearance creates a problem, a crisis. The oil the foolish girls brought wasn’t enough. All the wick trimming in the world will do them no good. Likewise, all the brilliant steps that we take to keep our lives running right are irrelevant, useless. We can do all the ‘right’ things to have a good, secure, happy life, but none of that protects us, none of it saves us from hardships and trials in life. That such crises arise is not proof necessarily that we have done something wrong. The bridegroom is simply late for his own party: God has taken so long to show up that the world has dug its own grave in the meantime. And we are left in the hole, with only the wick-trimming wisdom of the world to help us. The light is dying and we are panicked.

As the foolish bridesmaids discover, time has run out, as it always does in real life. We hit a wall, a limit, a point after which it is too late. We don’t know when we will reach this point, what historical or theological circumstances might constitute such a dreadful expiration. But the parable does seem to say that there will be a point where there simply *isn’t* any more time, when ‘maybe’ is no longer permitted and we have to make a decision, ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ when a lifetime of living in faith or without it catches up, and it’s too late to change.

This then is the lesson we are to take from this parable: some day, sooner or later, it will be too late for us to believe, too late for us to have time to develop a trusting relationship with.

That finality is how our parable ends. “While they went to buy more oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.”” The shut door is God’s final answer to the foolish wisdom of the world. The dreadful sentence, “Truly, I say to you, I never knew you,” is simply the truth of their condition. Notice, the bridegroom does not say, “I never called you.” He does not say, “I never loved you.” He does not say, “I never invited you.” He only says, “I never knew you—because you never bothered to know me.” And now it’s too late.

We should not be too eager to set up our rules for what constitutes the limit, temporal or eternal, of God’s patience with the lack of faith. But this parable, together with the other two parables of Matthew 25, say plainly enough that there is a limit and there will one day be a point of crisis, an unignorable time of decision, beyond which all that is opposed to God will be allowed no further truck with God’s creation, when God wills the eternal picnic to begin and the party poopers have to stop praying for rain.

So, keep your wicks trimmed and your oil filled, for it would be such a pity to miss all the party!

Artistic Illumination

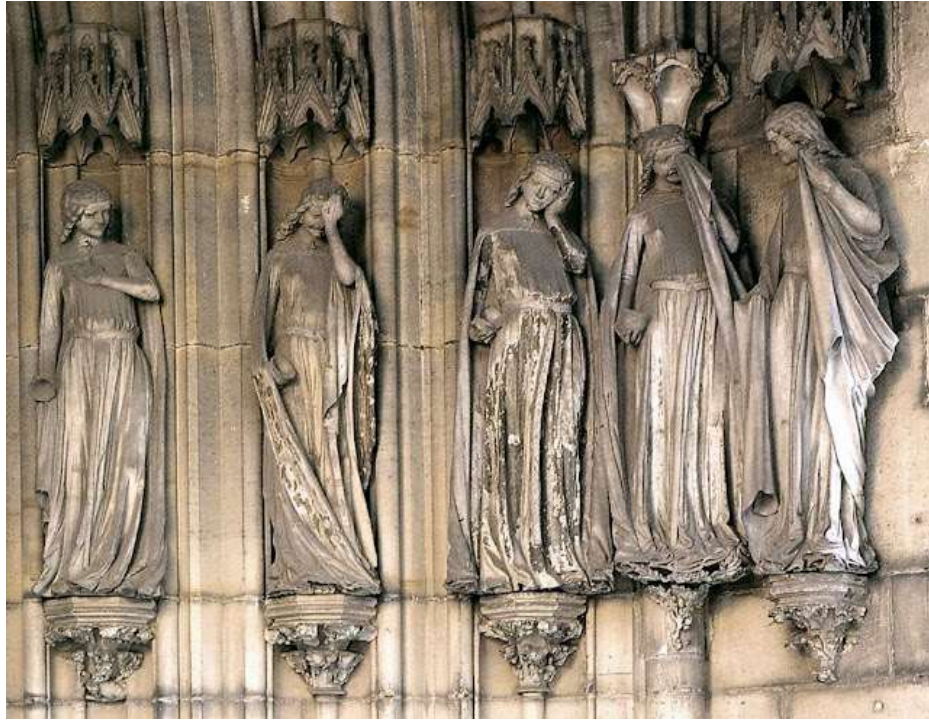
Artists have been depicting this parable since medieval times, but over time there has been a subtle change in what the works of art are saying. In the earlier centuries, the women are simply presented as having lighted lamps or having lamps that are empty of oil. Quite often the division is reinforced by showing the wise virgins wearing crowns, while the foolish ones are bare headed. Also, the lamps of the foolish are frequently shown pointing down, indicating that they are empty.



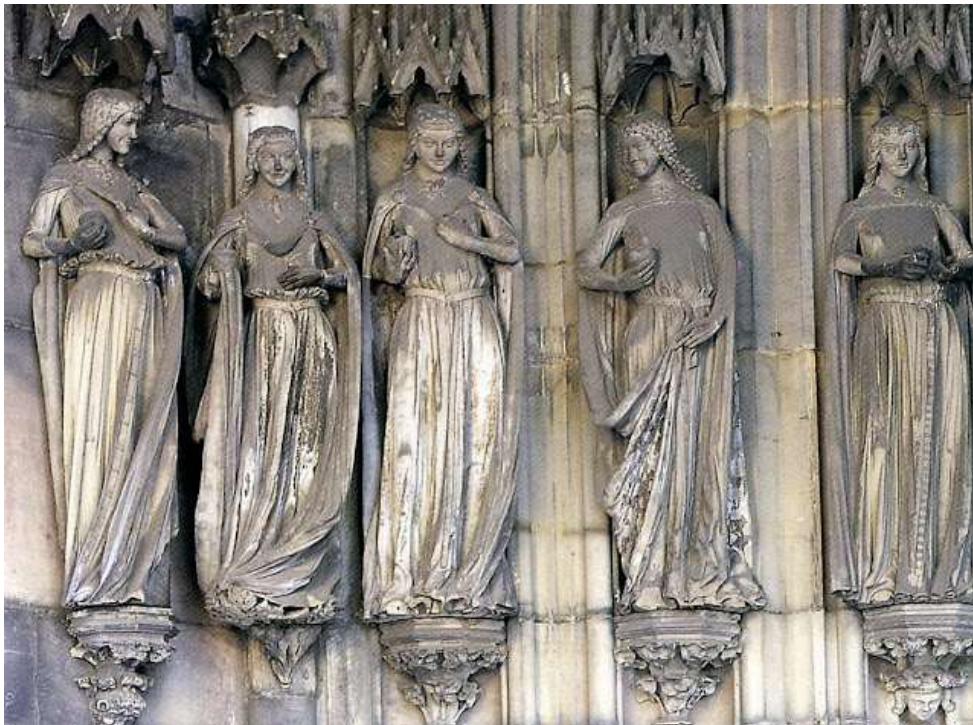
Meister des Evangeliiars von Rossano, *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Die Parabel der klugen und der törichten Jungfrauen)*, from Codex Purpureus, Szene, 6th century



Claes Brouwer, the Alexander Master, *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, From a *History Bible*, Dutch (Utrecht), c. 1430



The Foolish Virgins, German, Magdeburg, Cathedral, c. 1245



The Wise Virgins, German, Magdeburg, Cathedral, c. 1245

These implications are made even more explicit in a Flemish painting from about 1450 which combines the story of the wise and foolish virgins with the Last Judgment. Each group stands in front of the group to which they will belong. The wise virgins are placed below the group of the saved and are being guided by an angel to reach that group. The foolish virgins are placed in front of the damned and turn sadly away as they realize where they must go.



Last Judgment With the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins
Flemish, c. 1450-1480

An engraving made by Philips Galle after a design by Pieter Bruegel the Elder sometime around 1550 continues the theme of the parable related to the end of times, but also looks forward to what would become the central theme of painters in the future. In the foreground the two groups spend their waiting time in very different activities. The wise diligently work hard at activities related to the wool trade. They card and spin and embroider, while their foolish counterparts spend their time idly in dancing and playing music, while their lamps lie empty. In the middle ground an angel appears holding a banner which says "*Behold, the bridegroom is coming! Go out to meet him!*" (Matthew 25:6). In the background Christ, the Bridegroom, welcomes the souls of the wise to heaven, while on the other side of the image, the souls of the foolish face a closed door. On the side of the steps leading to the closed door are the words "I do not know you" (Matthew 25:12). At the bottom of the image are the words with which the foolish begged the wise for some oil, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out", as well as the reply of the wise "No, for there may not be enough for us and you". (Matthew 25:8-9)



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Netherlandish, 1525–1569), *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins*, c1560–3

Other artists depict the moment of conflict in which the foolish begged the wise for some of their oil and the prudent wise refused to share in case they too would be unready for the arrival of the Bridegroom.



William Blake (British, 1757-1827), *Wise And Foolish Virgins*, 1826



John Everett Millais (British, 1829-1896), *The Wise Virgins*, 1864



Charles Ricketts (English, 1866-1931), *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, c1900



Godfried Schalcken (Dutch, 1643-1706), *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, c. 1700



Walter Rane (American, 1949-), *Five of Them Were Wise*, 1999



James Tissot (French, 1836–1902), *The Wise Virgins* (*Les vierges sages*), 1886-94

In these pictures by Tissot we see a more naturalist depiction of the parable. The wise virgins who, though they have fallen asleep, have sufficient oil to keep their lamps brightly lit, and the foolish virgins rushing back to the house with the oil they have purchased. We know they will be too late, but they do not.



James Tissot (French, 1836–1902), *The Foolish Virgins* (*Les vierges folles*), 1886-94



Fortescue Brickdale Eleanor (1871-1945), *Wise and Foolish Virgins*, 1899

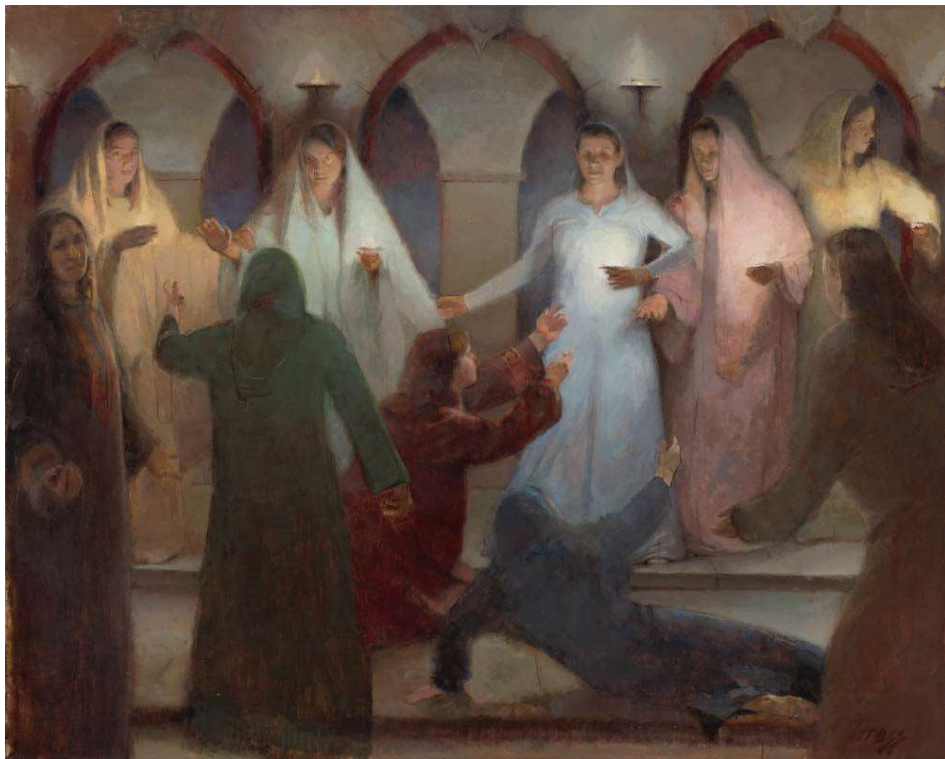
Here the artists have altered the story to portray the foolish virgins as having fallen asleep, not alert but panicked at the news of the groom's arrival.



Ernest Karlovich Lipgart (Estonian-Russian, 1847-1932), *The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins*, 1886



Charles Haslewood Shannon (British, 1863–1937), *The Wise And Foolish Virgins*, 1920



Paul Stephen Grass (American, 1978–), *Parable of the Ten Virgins*, 2012

Grass explains his work: “This piece is a narrative of the parable of the ten virgins, found in the book of Matthew. I believe that people are very concerned about their family members and friends who are not living the principles of the gospel. The girl reaching back toward the other who is begging is of compelling interest to me. I love the idea that all of us would like to bring a friend or family member along in the gospel. No matter how prepared we are, we all have some light in us.”

The following pieces show the final scene of the parable, where the foolish bridesmaids find themselves shutout from the wedding party.



Dinah Roe Kendall (British, 1923-), *Wise and Foolish Virgins*, 1994

Nikola Saric (Serbian, 1985-), *Foolish Virgins*, contemporary



John Melhuish Strudwick (1849-1937), *The Ten Virgins*, 1891



J Kirk Richards (American, 1976-),
The Ten Virgins, 2000

Here the artist depicts in high contrast the emotional consequence of the foolish bridesmaids finding the door shut.



Dinah Rau (American), Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, 2016

In these pieces, the artist depicts the wise bridesmaids', exclusively, as light-bearers.



Michael Malm (American, 1972-), *Five Were Wise*, contemporary



J. Kirk Richards (American, 1976-), *Candle Bearers*, 2003



James C Janknegt (American, 1953-),
The Foolish and Wise Bridesmaids, 2003

The artist has chosen to update the story to have the bridesmaids bearing flashlights, rather than lamps, with batteries rather than oil being short supply.



Gayla Prince (American), *Parable of the 10 Virgins, 1984*

According to Prince's web site, "prints of her painting 'The Ten Virgins' have sold over one million copies. She has been invited to give over 500 presentations of that paintings symbolism to groups around the United States. She then developed a slide and script presentation that has been given by thousands of presenters to millions of people worldwide." Her description on the allegorical representation of each figure can be found [here](#).



Jorge Cocco Santángelo (Argentinean, 1936-), *Ten Virgins*, 2017



James C Christensen (American, 1942-), *Sharing Our Light*, 2001



Peter von Cornelius (German, 1784-1867, *The Wise and the Foolish Virgin*, 1813
Conelius shows the foolish women as having been let in to plead to Jesus.



Paul Delvaux (Belgian, 1897-1994), *The Wise Virgins (Les Vierges Sages)*, 1965
Interestingly here the bridesmaids number 7, not 5, as in the parable, and are dressed in bridal or bridesmaid's dresses, whereas the five foolish bridesmaids in the background are found naked and exposed.