

# “You know, I’ve never liked this story”

## Divine Violence & Exclusion in a NT Parable

### A Study in Four Parts

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#### Introduction

The inspiration for this study was a Bibliodrama session I attended at the German Kirchentag in Stuttgart in 2015 where we explored the Parable of the Wise & Foolish Virgins together. This particular session involved roleplay, and I chose to take the part of one of the foolish virgins because I have, for a long time, felt that the parable was rather harsh on them and wanted to explore those feelings in more depth.

There is an ongoing debate in New Testament studies as to whether some, at least, of the parables are intended to be read allegorically, in other words, whether every detail in them is significant and represents something. For much of Christian history, until the late nineteenth century, this was the generally accepted way of reading them, indeed of reading much of the Bible. Jesus’ own explanation of the Parable of the Sower seems to imply that it should be read allegorically, with the sower representing God, the seed representing Jesus’ message, and each different soil representing a different hearer of his message. But this approach doesn’t work with every parable, and to attempt to identify every element in every story leads to some rather arbitrary identifications, so it may be that the most fruitful approach is to take each parable in its own right and to seek the most appropriate way of reading it.

Yet however one approaches them, the fact remains that many of the New Testament parables would appear to present a picture of God very different to that offered by Jesus elsewhere in his life and teaching. It is as if Jesus is calling us to a life of sharing, co-operation and nonviolence only for God to show quite the opposite traits when that call is not heeded. This tension is present throughout the New Testament but it is one that we have grown used to, so much so that I suspect much of the time we don’t even notice it. However, once we do, it is difficult to ignore it.

After acknowledging that some of the New Testament writers (for example, Matthew) most probably mean to portray God as violent, Derek Flood asks whether such a picture of God is indeed

*the highest/best/truest vision we can achieve? I think the fact that we struggle with it is a hint that we all know that this is not the best image of God. There is something wrong with it. It does not fit. It is ... un-Christlike.*<sup>1</sup>

## The Language of the Parables

It is this realisation that “this is not the best image of God” which led me to prepare this study. For maybe it is time that we began to ask hard questions of our long-accepted reading of the New Testament parables and their vision of the future, both in terms of their portrayal of God and also of their habit of exclusion, neither of which match up to the gospels’ picture of Jesus.

It may be that, as some scholars contend, the parables are not to be taken literally, that they use what we might term “poetic license” to put their point across. This means that it is not every detail which matters, but their basic thrust which is the essential message. In the end, it may be that we are actually in danger of reading too much into (or out of) the parables.

*We need to first remember that this is a parable: although a parable can reveal more than “giving it straight” can inform us, it also hides difficult truths to give what the audience can handle. So, in this sense, “anything goes” to make a point in a parable, but the mechanisms that arrive at that point can’t be taken as “informative” in the concrete sense, but instead as the partially (or ultimately) disposable means by which we arrive at the real point(s) for which the parable was written. I.e., don’t confuse the ends with the means.*<sup>2</sup>

Mindful of this possibility, the question then arises as to how we read and communicate the parables, discerning what is of their essence and what is “disposable”, in a way that makes spiritual and theological sense today. As Barbara Reid puts it:

*Another consideration is the metaphorical nature of parables and of images of God. There is always an “is” and an “is not” to metaphors. One could say that the violent language and imagery in the Matthean parables are not literal descriptions of divine eschatological violence but metaphors that make vivid the extreme seriousness of the choice to imitate God’s graciousness or not. As Matthew attempted to depict how awful it would be at the end-time for those who are unrepentant evildoers, he employs familiar imagery from the biblical tradition. The burning of the city in Matt 22:7, for example, recalls the images of fire and judgment used by the prophets Amos (1:4, 10), Ezekiel (38:22; 39:6), and Malachi (4:2). A question that contemporary Christian practitioners of nonviolence pose is, What nonviolent metaphors might be used today to express this reality?*<sup>3</sup>

Reid’s concluding question here is one you may wish to take up as we go through this study. Are there ways in which might we more effectively, less violently, and more inclusively, communicate the message of the parables without at the same time emptying them of any real meaning ?

*After all, parables provoke rather than preach, tease rather than tutor, inspire rather than instruct, and destabilize rather than indoctrinate. In short, parables invite participation to probe meaning, not least their own.*<sup>4</sup>

This study is an invitation to heed these words as we revisit a New Testament parable, participate in it through role play, probe its meaning through discussion, and allow it to tease, provoke and challenge us.

### Worlds Behind & In Front of the Text

It is important to remember that the New Testament parables, whether they were originally told by Jesus or are the creation of the Gospel writer, are addressed to a specific audience out of whose lives the story arises and for whose lives their various details would have had very specific resonances, some of which are unknown to us. One of the tasks of the biblical scholar is to explore the world behind the text, the world of Jesus, the gospel writer and their first hearers / readers, and bring to life for us those resonances that 2000 years of history have hidden from us. It is, therefore, important to be mindful of what scholars can tell us of this world behind the text. However, our main focus here is with the world in front of the text – our world and our own reaction to these stories.

My longstanding problem with the Parable of the Wise & Foolish Virgins is that it seems overly harsh on the so-called foolish virgins, overly generous to the so-called wise virgins, and as for the Bridegroom, shutting the foolish virgins out of the wedding banquet... My own feelings are summed up in this short excerpt from a liturgical drama based on the parable, where the so-called foolish virgins share their real thoughts about the story:

*One: You know, I've never liked this story.*

*Two: Why not?*

*One: Well, no matter how you tell it, somehow somebody gets left out.*

*Five: That's the point, isn't it?*

*One: I didn't say I didn't get it. I said, I didn't like it.*<sup>5</sup>

There is a difference between on the one hand not liking a story because we don't want to face what it says (indeed some might accuse us of doing just this here), and on the other not liking a story because it appears to contradict our core beliefs about God and the world. For me, and I suspect those I have quoted above and many of you reading this, the reason we are uneasy with some of these stories is because we believe that the God of Jesus is so much bigger than the kings and bridegrooms and masters of the parables.

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like this ..."

## The Parable of the Ten Virgins

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*These four studies are an invitation to engage in depth with one of the New Testament parables and to ask hard questions both of the parable and of ourselves as readers and interpreters.*

*You are encouraged to be as honest as possible in your reflection and discussion. It is likely that there will be a range of views within your group and hopefully by sharing together you can learn from one another. Please feel free to adapt the studies to local use, adding or substituting your own thoughts, ideas and approaches. The important thing is that participants have an opportunity to raise any questions that they have about the parable and its message.*

*As you start to engage with the parable, take care not to neglect its opening words: "The Kingdom of Heaven will be like this ...". What makes the questions raised by parables such as this particularly acute are precisely these words. Is this really what the Kin(g)dom of God is like? Is God's Realm characterised by forced division and exclusion in the way seemingly described in the parable? Or are these figures of speech, ways of making a point? What do you think?*

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### **Matthew 25: 1- 13**

25<sup>1</sup>Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup>but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup>But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." <sup>7</sup>Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." <sup>9</sup>But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." <sup>10</sup>And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup>Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." <sup>12</sup>But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." <sup>13</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

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## Part One

### Exploring the Parable through Bible Study

**Read:** Matthew 25: 1 – 13

**Share:** How do you react to the parable ?  
Do you have any questions about the parable ?

**Study:** As you read the parable again try to visualise how its original hearers would have received it.

*The Parable of the Wise & Foolish Virgins is found only in Matthew's gospel, and in the context of an ongoing concern with preparedness, running from the beginning of Matthew 24, becoming more focused from verse 36, and culminating in the Parable of the Talents, which follows on immediately after our parable, and then finally the Sheep and the Goats. Commentators tend to identify the bridegroom with Jesus. You might wish to read the entire section before focusing on the parable itself, making use of the quotes below, all from recent commentaries:*

To participate in their friend's wedding was a great honor: as virgins, these young women were in a sense practicing for their own impending weddings around the ages of twelve to sixteen. But to have spoiled the wedding for her by failing to do their appropriate part was a great insult to their friend and to the groom and guests. That they would be shut out of the feast in punishment suits their case, but the language used to depict this nightmare points beyond itself to more severe, eternal judgment ... <sup>6</sup>

The main point of the story is that the foolish virgins are not ready when the great moment finally arrives. ... The sleeping of the virgins is simply a narrative detail that fills in the time between the commencement of the waiting and the bride groom's arrival. Despite the attached command "Watch!" (v. 13), the sleeping of the foolish virgins is not the source of their problem, since the wise sleep also. Being watchful means being ready at all times, whether waking or sleeping. <sup>7</sup>

While some have argued that an original parable of Jesus is at the core ... others have seen it as a Matthean allegorical composition by the early church ... or of Matthew himself... The key issue is whether the details are realistic (parable) or seem contrived to fit the theological meaning (allegory). Unfortunately, we do not know the marriage customs of first-century Palestine well enough to make definitive judgments on this basis, and the story itself is unclear on the procedures of the wedding celebration. Where is the bride, who is never mentioned? <sup>8</sup>

**Reflect:** Reflect together on the parable in light of what you have read.  
What do you think its message was for its original hearers ?  
What do you think its message is for us ?  
What does it mean for us to "be prepared" ? For what ?  
How well does the parable "work" for you ?

## Part Two

### Participating in the Parable through Role Play

- Prepare:** Each person to take a role – either a Wise Virgin, Foolish Virgin, or the Bridegroom  
Each person to share why they have chosen the particular role
- Role Play:** Go through the story, pausing after each part of the story to question one another and to share experiences and feelings

#### Some Questions to the Wise

- Why did you take spare oil ?
- Why do you think the others didn't ?
- How did you feel when the others asked you for some of your oil ?
- Why did you choose not to give them any ?
  
- How did you feel when the others were not let in at the end ?
- Do you think this was fair ?
- Would you have given them some oil if you had known what would happen ?

#### Some Questions to the Foolish

- Why did you not take any spare oil ?
- How did you feel when the others refused to give you some of their oil ?
- How do you react to their reason for refusing ?
  
- How did you feel at the end when you were not let in ?
- Do you think this was fair ?
- Would you have taken some spare oil if you had known what would happen ?

#### Some Questions to the Bridegroom

- How did you feel when the latecomers knocked on the door ?
- Why did you not let them in ?
- How do you feel about how the story turns out ?

- Reflect:** Each person to reflect together on their role  
What have you learned about your own role and the other roles ?  
What questions (if any) are you left with ?  
Has this exercise helped in your understanding of the parable ?

## Part Three

### Engaging with Critics of the Parable

**Read:** Matthew 25: 1 – 13

**Share:** Revisit the questions you raised at the first session  
Have your thoughts on the parable changed since then? If so, how?  
How do you react to the parable now?

*This parable is not without its critics, representative voices of whom are quoted below. These voices remind us that there is more than one way of reading the parable and that it is possible to read it as commending selfishness, separation and exclusion. However we react to these voices it is important that we hear them and consider how we would respond to them and address their concerns:*

What are we to do with those wise ones who couldn't spare an ounce of oil, those wise ones who chose their needs over the needs of others? What are we to do with them?

Truly, I can think of nowhere else in the Bible that we have afforded such selfish behavior such an exalted place. No, they say, we cannot share with you because we might not have enough for ourselves. We're not sure, but just to be safe, we're not sharing what we have.

\* \* \*

And then, what are we to do with this bridegroom, this apparent Christ-figure who acts so uncharitably, who tells the industrious foolish bridesmaids to go away? Is this the same Jesus, the shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for the lost one, the woman who leaves no stone unturned in search of a lost coin?<sup>9</sup>

But when I finish hearing the parable, I still notice that it does its work by separating and excluding. The women are separated from each other (by the amount of oil in their lamps) and they do not offer aid to each other. Those who arrive late have the door shut in their faces, this though it is the middle of the night and they are alone on the street. Beyond that, this story of separation and exclusion aims its energy at women.

I am suspicious of such stories, and have come to distrust them. There is danger in narrative schemes that only work if women are made to be morons. There is danger in any theological structure that imagines that separation and exclusion are the essence of faithfulness. It is time we pointed these dangers out.<sup>10</sup>

**Discuss:** How would you respond to the points raised in the quotes above?  
Do you think they are legitimate concerns?  
What might it mean to point these dangers out?  
Do you think the parable commends selfishness?

What to you are (1) essential; and (2) dispensable aspects of the story?

## Part Four

### Retelling the Parable for Today ?

**Reflect:** Mindful of the questions raised above, and within your group, consider together how you might retell the parable for today  
What would be the purpose of your retelling ?

*Novelist Philip Pullmann rewrote the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins as part of his novel The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ. Asked about his retelling of the parable he explained his reasons for doing so:*

'I changed the account of the five foolish virgins simply because I cannot believe that the Jesus who on one occasion taught selflessness and not concerning yourself with tomorrow, could on another occasion praise these rather mean and greedy little virgins who didn't give their oil to anybody else; praise them for looking ahead and being so prudent. That's a Thatcherite vision that the first Jesus would have condemned utterly. I can't believe they both came from the same mouth. So, I've changed the story of the girls with the oil to make it rather closer to what I believe Jesus would have said.'<sup>11</sup>

*You can read Pullman's retelling here:*

'Then at midnight there was a cry: "He's coming! The bridegroom is here!" "The girls woke up at once and started trimming their lamps. You can see what happened next: the foolish ones discovered that their oil had run out. "Give us some of your oil!" they said to the others. "Look, our lamps are going out!" And two of the far-seeing ones shared their oil with two of the foolish ones, and all four were admitted to the banquet. Two of the clever ones refused, and the bridegroom shut them out, together with two more foolish ones. But the last wise girl said "Lord, we have come to celebrate your wedding, even the least of us. If you won't let us all in, I would rather stay outside with my sisters, even when the last of my oil is gone." And for her sake the bridegroom opened the doors of the banquet and admitted them all. Now where was the Kingdom of heaven? Inside the bridegroom's house? Is that what you think? No it was outside in the dark with the wise girl and her sisters, even when the last of her oil was gone.'<sup>12</sup>

*In his review of Gerald O'Collin's book Philip Pullman's Jesus (DLT, 2010) one reviewer suggests that on the parable 'Perhaps O'Collins has the better exegesis while Pullman has the more attractive "reading". Arguably both express a kind of truth.'<sup>13</sup>*

**Discuss:** How do you react to Pullmann's retelling of the parable and his rationale for doing so ? How would you address the concerns he expresses in the interview ?

Do you agree with the reviewer's conclusion quoted above that "both express a kind of truth" ?

Is it possible to use "nonviolent metaphors" to express the importance of being prepared for the bridegroom's coming, as Barbara Reid suggests above ? If so, what might this mean in practise ?



## Conclusion

### A Violent & Exclusive God ?

The key question raised by this study is whether there is a tension between two very different God-images presented in the New Testament.

If the life and teaching of Jesus is characterised by radical inclusion and nonviolent love, then surely it makes no sense for those who fail to heed that call to be threatened by exclusion and violence. If they are, when a parable begins with the claim that "The Kingdom of Heaven will be like this", which part of the parable can be said to embody the Kingdom ? Is it possible for both to ?

Faced with this apparent discrepancy, it would seem that either we have misunderstood Jesus' message or we have misunderstood the parables. My view is that it is more likely that we have misunderstood the parables, and that is my assumption here in this study.

It may be that the parables are intended to shock us with their harsh and unhappy endings, and that by doing so they seek to make clear that their message is important and that actions do indeed have consequences. It may be, too, that their original audience could live with the tension more easily than we can.

Towards the end of his book on Matthew's Gospel, the late New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz ventures the beginning of an answer to the question which is preoccupying us here. For Luz, the idea of "judgment" (and hence exclusion) is a necessity not for God but for us, for without it we would be unable to take seriously the call of God:

We remain in a quandary. It seems to me that the notion of judgement according to works is a theological impossibility for the God who abides in Jesus of Nazareth and who defined himself in the resurrection. But it may be that we, as human beings, need the idea of judgement because, without it, we would be unable to take God seriously as God. The idea may be an anthropological necessity. Is this the solution to the deep dilemma underlying not only the Gospel of Matthew but the New Testament as a whole? <sup>14</sup>

Whether we agree with Luz or not, there are no easy answers to the questions posed by parables such as the Wise & Foolish Virgins. Questions such as those raised above will not go away, and further questions will no doubt present themselves in the future. But I hope that this opportunity to engage in depth with a parable will help you either to better understand the very real questions it raises for many readers or to begin to answer those questions for yourself. I hope, too, that at least some of the approach set out here might help you to engage with other parables raising similar questions.

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- <sup>1</sup> Derek Flood <https://www.clarion-journal.com/files/matthew-22.pdf>  
[https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion\\_journal\\_of\\_spirit/2015/10/unchristlike-images-of-god-in-matt-22114-b-jersak-b-zahnd-d-flood-a-klager.html](https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2015/10/unchristlike-images-of-god-in-matt-22114-b-jersak-b-zahnd-d-flood-a-klager.html)
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Klager <https://www.clarion-journal.com/files/matthew-22.pdf>  
[https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion\\_journal\\_of\\_spirit/2015/10/unchristlike-images-of-god-in-matt-22114-b-jersak-b-zahnd-d-flood-a-klager.html](https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2015/10/unchristlike-images-of-god-in-matt-22114-b-jersak-b-zahnd-d-flood-a-klager.html)
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara Reid, 'Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and Christian Nonviolence', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66: 2 (April 2004), p. 254
- <sup>4</sup> David J Neville, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of Shalom: Reading Texts of Teleological Terror in Peace Perspective', *Word & World* 34: 4 (Fall 2014), p. 344
- <sup>5</sup> John Steven Paul, 'Ready?: a liturgical drama based on Matthew 25:1-13' *ARTS*, 15: 1, 2003, p 22-28
- <sup>6</sup> Craig Keener, *Commentary on Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 599
- <sup>7</sup> Douglas Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation, WJK, 2009), p. 285
- <sup>8</sup> M Eugene Boring, *New Interpreters Bible*, Volume 8, (Abingdon, 1994), p. 449
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2014/11/the-breaking-of-the-bridesmaids-how-scripture-undermines-a-parable/>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2017/11/06/a-provocation-twenty-third-sunday-after-pentecost-november-12-2017-matthew-251-13/>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/kill-your-darlings-in-conversation-with-philip-pullman/>
- <sup>12</sup> Philip Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Canongate, 2017), pp. 141 / 142
- <sup>13</sup> [https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/book\\_20100811\\_1.htm](https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/book_20100811_1.htm)
- <sup>14</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge 1995), p. 132