

Why The Wise Virgins Could Not Share Their Oil



36th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Matthew 25:1-13

*The foolish [virgins] said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.”
But the wise ones replied, “No, for there may not be enough for us and you.”*

Have you ever wondered why it is that the wise virgins refuse to assist the foolish virgins by sharing a little of the oil from their own lamps? Doesn't it seem a bit odd that they care more for themselves than for the others?

The great 17th century Jesuit, Fr. Cornelius a' Lapide and the *Catena Aurea* of St. Thomas Aquinas (citing the tradition from the Fathers of the Church) offer an answer.

What the oil and lamps symbolize

There are numerous ways of interpreting both the virgins and their oil lamps. On the one hand, the virgins can signify all of humanity. On the other, the virgins might represent the Christian faithful only (and not those who have no faith). Finally, the virgins could specify only those Christian faithful who are consecrated to virginity (i.e. the religious). All of these interpretations enjoy the favor of certain of the Church Fathers.

However, if we look more closely at the parable, it is clear that the best interpretation is that by which the virgins are not all of humanity generally, nor only those Christians who are

consecrated to virginity, but all and only those who have faith. Hence, the one interpretation is too broad (including all, both believers and infidels) while the other is too narrow (excluding all non-virgins).

We can see that the virgins must signify all and only the believers; since they all have lamps, though they do not all have oil. For the lamp is the theological virtue of faith, while oil is charity which makes faith to be alive and saving. Thus, since all the virgins have lamps, it is clear that they signify all those who believe (and not the infidels). On the other hand, the foolish virgins were those who lacked sufficient oil, being the faithful who do not persevere to the end in charity and are thus condemned to hell – for faith without charity does not avail unto salvation.

Everyone needs his own oil and lamp

St. Thomas Aquinas makes an interesting point in his Commentary on the Letter of St. Paul to the Hebrews, stating that the infidels (those who have no faith) are not judged at all but are straight away condemned without any judgment. Thus it is that our Savior does not speak of the judgment of those who lack both oil and lamps but only of the virgins, i.e. only of the faithful. The foolish virgins, then, are those who have faith but lack charity, and so are condemned to hell. Yet these virgins are doubly foolish insofar as they both lack the virtue of charity (being in mortal sin) and also seek to gain this virtue from other believers. Do they not know that only God can bestow the virtue of charity? This is why it is called a *theological* virtue!

Thus, St. Thomas quotes St. John Chrysostom in the *Catena Aurea*: “For, though nothing could be more merciful than those wise virgins, who for this very mercifulness were approved, yet would they not grant the prayer of the foolish virgins. Hence we learn that none of us shall be able in that day to stand forth as patron of those who are betrayed by their own works, not because he will not, but because he cannot.”

Again, St. Jerome: “For these wise virgins do not answer thus out of covetousness, but out of fear. Wherefore, each man shall receive the recompense of his own works, and the virtues of one cannot atone for the vices of another in the day of judgment.”

Further consideration

It is precisely this point – that your virtue cannot make up for my vice, on the last day – which proves that we cannot (in the most proper sense of the term) *hope* for the salvation of others. Precisely because I cannot save anyone, excepting (by the grace of God alone) myself, I cannot hope for the salvation of any other than myself. Certainly, out of supernatural charity, I desire the salvation of all the living – but this desire is only “hope” in a secondary sense. Thus, we refer readers to our recent article on why it is wrong to say that we hope for the salvation of all.