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Virgins in the Church

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.” (Matt 25:1)

Thus begins the parable of the ten virgins. Many sermons have been preached about this parable. Every now and then (maybe more often now than then) a preacher gives what may be a misinterpretation of the parable. Quite often the interpretation goes, something like this. “The ten virgins represent the people on earth. Some are wise and accept Christ as the savior, and are ready for the judgement. Some are foolish and reject Jesus, and when the judgement comes they are unprepared. So come accept Christ and be like the five wise virgins.” This interpretation ignores the verse above.

To those of us who believe that the kingdom is the church this parable can be even more sobering. If we look at it as the Jews would have looked at it, it may become downright scary.

To most of Jesus’ original hearers, the kingdom meant the Jewish nation. Thus all ten of the virgins would have been in the kingdom. To those of us who don’t believe that God made a mistake and couldn’t establish his kingdom when Jesus was crucified, the church is the kingdom. (Col 1:13; 1 Cor 15:24) Thus the ten virgins would all have been in the church. Either way we can come to a different conclusion than the interpretation above.

All ten virgins are in the kingdom. All have chosen to follow God, to obey Him. All are waiting, with joy, for the bridegroom to come. They are in the church. They are among the saved. They have come out of the world. And yet ten virgins are foolish. They don’t have enough oil to last until the bridegroom comes.

These, then, may be compared to those in another parable. In Matthew 13 Jesus told what we sometimes call the parable of the soils. In it some of the seed fell on stony ground, and some was choked by thorns.

“But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not

root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.” (Matt 13:20-22)

These are like the five foolish virgins. These are people who believe and obey. They are Christians, elect of God. *And yet they may be rejected by God at the judgement!*

Some people will tell us that those who are truly among God’s elect can not sin so as to be eternally lost. That is not what Jesus is saying here and in the parable of the soils. What he is saying should make some people shudder.

The ten virgins are Christians who have been ready, have eagerly anticipated the coming of Jesus. But the fire has gone out. They may be resting on their laurels, or their pews. Soon they realize that they aren’t ready for the bridegroom. They may have let sin snuff out their lamps, or they may just have let the oil run low for lack of activity. They have been in the church, but they choose to leave to look for oil. They just don’t last until the end. And that is terrible! Somebody left the salvation they had, and end up in the darkness outside.

We all need to know that we can’t stop growing in Christ, for to stop is to regress. All Christians need the warning Jesus gave at the end of the parable (verse 13): “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

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In Our Image

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” (Gen 1:26) Since that was written people have been debating what it means to have been created in the image of God.

The Bible doesn't make it clear what is meant by the image of God. In the most famous incident in which a form of God is mentioned Moses is told that he can only see God's back (Ex 33:23). Most people interpret this as a figurative description of God, though, and not to imply that we are created to look like God physically. God's hand is often spoken of, but again that can be figurative. We are told that God is spirit (Jn 4:24). If so, then it stands to reason that the image of God is a spiritual rather than physical image.

Because the scripture is so silent on the exact meaning of the phrase people have offered many possible interpretations. Perhaps some are right; perhaps none are right. We can not know until we see God. But we can learn a little about the nature of God, and ourselves, from some of the suggested meanings.

The ability to laugh

Some have suggested that we are in the image of God because man is the only creature that

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has the ability to laugh. Of course, just because we have abilities or qualities not shared by other creatures doesn't necessarily mean that is how we are in God's image, but this is one area where we are similar to God.

Humor is the ability to see the ridiculous in the sublime, or the sublime in the ridiculous. We laugh because we can see the incongruous. The point of most humor is the unexpected; something that happens different from the build-up, or a comparison that seems out of place. Most jokes fall in the first group, most puns in the latter.

Someone once said that God's sense of humor can be seen in the camel. Perhaps it can also be seen in man. That is why we laugh so much at ourselves.

We do know that God has a sense of humor. God loves a good (or is it bad) pun. The scriptures are full of them, if we know where to look. If we are in God's image, however, it should not be in our ability to laugh.

Every time the scriptures describe God as laughing it is in derision rather than joy; in scorn rather than humor. “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.” (Ps 2:4) “The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.” (Ps 37:13) “I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.” (Prov 1:26) Although the Psalms also picture the righteous as laughing at the fate of the wicked, this is not generally how we feel we should picture God. We would rather be in the image of God as love than God as rejoicing in calamity.

Probably the best known example of laughter in the Bible is when Sara laughed at having found out she was going to have a child in her old age (Gen 18). God asks, “Why did Sara laugh?” Interestingly, Abraham laughed at the same news and wasn't chided for it. If we are in God's image because we can laugh, why would he object when it happens? Why would there be “a time to weep and a time to laugh” (Ecc 3:4)?

The ability to say “no”

We are “in the image of God”, and different from animals, in that we have the capacity to say “no.” We have a moral sense. To use Rabbi Yissocher Frand's example: you leave a picnic basket of food in a field. The animals come and eat of it. They don't care if it is someone else's food. They can't say no. A man, on the other hand, sees the basket and says “I can't eat it; it belongs to somebody else.” He can say “no.” Insofar as he doesn't say no he diminishes the image of God within him.

There may be something in this, more than in saying we are in God's image because we can laugh. However, it is important to make the distinction between saying “no” in answer to someone's request and saying “no” to something because it is morally

wrong. God can, and does, say “no” when we pray for something that is not in our best interest (Jas 4:3). This is not what is meant by the ability to say “no” in this context.

Here the idea is that man has a moral sense. When faced with something, man can ask himself what is right and what is not, and decide between the two. If he decides for the right, he is in God’s image. If he decides for the wrong, he is “of your father the devil” (Jn 8:44). When an animal is faced with a choice, he obeys his instincts. OK, so a cat’s instincts are to do exactly the opposite of what his human wants him to do, but he still obeys his instincts. An animal doesn’t choose between right and wrong because they don’t know that there is right or wrong. They only know there is that which brings punishment and that which doesn’t.

In Genesis, chapter 3, the serpent told Eve that the fruit of the forbidden tree would make them “like gods, knowing good and evil.” Of course, he was a liar when he wanted to be, but if he was telling the truth in this, then their lack of knowledge of good and evil would mean that this was not how they were in God’s image. On the other hand, just the temptation to eat implied that they already new good and evil. So it could still be that the ability to resist temptation made them like God. It could still be, except that James tells us (1:13) that God can not be tempted with evil. God is not like us, in that he has no choice but to say no. So if this is how we are in the image of God, then we are imperfectly in God’s image. He has given us free will; but he has given us something of his image in the ability to choose the right.

The ability to speak

Another suggestion has been that we are in God’s image because we, of all creation, have the ability to express abstract ideas in speech. Other animals can communicate vocally, perhaps even verbally. But there is little evidence that they can synthesize ideas in the abstract.

God’s creative power was in speech. He created the world through speech (Gen 1, 2). God even says that speech is what can make man able to do anything he imagines, as God himself can do.

And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have

imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. (Gen 11:6-7)

The ability to speak gives man a creative power beyond the rest of creation. Perhaps it is that ability that makes us most like God. However, it is also that ability that makes us least like God.

This point is related to the previous one because speech gives us free will and moral choice. Just as we create through speech, we can tempt and

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be tempted through speech. If we can *say* “no” we also have the ability to *say* “yes” to temptation.

It is our ability to speak that causes us the most problems. James pointed this out when he said, “And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.” (Jas 3:6) Through speech we can be creative like God. Through speech we can be deceitful like the devil. It has been suggested that the tongue is hard to control because interface between God-likeness and earth-likeness. James also said, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.” (Jas 3:2) If we control the interface then we can be like God. If we lose control, we become earthy.

So maybe we are in God’s image because of our ability to laugh; but probably not. If we are in God’s image because of our ability to say no to temptation or our ability to speak, and therefore create, then we have the ability to corrupt that image and use it for evil as well as for good. The scriptures don’t say what it means to be in God’s image. Apparently, though, we must continue to strive to be more perfectly in that image, whatever it is. Maybe God didn’t explain himself so that we would make the effort in all areas of our life.

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