Verses 1–13: We call this the parable of the ten virgins. We know little about marriage ceremonies in Palestine during Jesus’s time. As with other Palestinian Jewish customs of the day, most of what we say about such things is really a description of customs 200 years or so later. Perhaps those later customs reflect what happened in Jesus’s day. It is likely that there was considerable continuity between the first and the second centuries. But we cannot know what the customs were like, and the tremendous social upheaval resulting from the destruction of the temple in AD 70 could have interrupted the continuity of traditions.

Nevertheless, we can infer some things from this parable itself: Wedding feasts seem to have been held at night; otherwise there would be no reason for the bridal attendants to bring their lamps. It seems that the bride’s attendants went out to escort the groom to the wedding feast, presumably held at the bride’s house. It may be that the groom did not arrive at a particular time, but the tarrying of the groom in this parable might be for the story rather than because it was a custom.

How do the scriptures use the symbols of a bride and groom in other places? (See, for example, Matthew 9:15 and 22:1–14, as well as John 3:29. For another example, see the first several chapters of Hosea.) What do they stand for? Given
that symbolism, whom might the ten virgins, the bridal attendants, stand for?

Do the lamps and oil represent anything in particular? If so, what?

Does the parable criticize those who slept while they waited? Is their sleep symbolic?

Whom does the parable criticize and for what? Be careful that your answers are based on what the scriptures say rather than on what you have always heard.

Why do the wise virgins refuse to share their oil with the foolish ones (verse 9)?

Why might it be such a big deal that the door is shut (verse 11)? In other words, might there be a practical reason that guests could not expect to be admitted after the door was shut and barred?

Why would this parable have been particularly important to the disciples at this point in Jesus’s life?

What would verse 13 have meant to them? What does it mean to us?

**Verses 14–30:** This, of course, is the parable of the talents. A talent is a weight, supposedly the weight you could expect a laborer to carry. It represented a large sum of money, almost 65 pounds of silver, and since silver was more scarce in biblical times than in our own, it was also more valuable. The *Word Biblical Commentary* says that a talent was worth about 6,000 days’ work for a common laborer! If that is accurate, that is easily the equivalent of almost a million dollars in today’s wages.
To understand the story better, remember what it is about: A very wealthy man is taking a long trip. Before he leaves, he takes his property and divides it among each of three stewards (who would have been his slaves), commanding them to take care of that property until he returns. Since the property is his to begin with and the servants are his slaves, when he returns, everything that he gave them will still be his, as will any profit they have made on his money. (This circumstance, giving money to slave-stewards and expecting them to make a profit, was covered in Roman law, so it seems to have been common enough that it would not have seemed strange to Jesus’s listeners.) Given Jewish law against interest, perhaps the profit was not interest but profit from land or commodity speculation. Only verse 27 mentions interest. However, that reference suggests that the fictional lord whom Jesus has in mind is a Gentile, which would make interest a possibility.

What kind of return does each servant but the third get on the money that the lord gives him? Is the return low, normal, or high? What does each servant receive from his lord?

Why does the lord take from the slothful servant what he has been given? It seems unfair to take from those who have not and to give to those who already have (verse 29). Is that what is going on? How are we to understand this? What is it that those who receive already have? What is it that the others do not have and is taken away?

To understand the parable better, also think about its context: To whom does Jesus teach this parable? Given that audience and the fact that the parable is sandwiched between two parables about the second coming, what would you say is its point?
To the disciples as they listened to this parable, what would the talents have represented?

If the point of the earlier parable of the ten virgins is that the disciples must be prepared for the second coming, what does this parable teach them about the second coming? What does it teach us?

Verses 31–46: We say that this is a parable about the last judgment, but is it that or is it about the criteria for entering God’s kingdom?

In what sense was the kingdom prepared before the world was founded or created?

What kinds of works does Jesus mention in verses 35–37? Are they obligations or duties?

Why are those speaking in verses 38–39 surprised? How do you account for the fact that they don’t know when they did the things for which they are rewarded? What does that teach us about our own works?

Those who are condemned are equally surprised. Why? What might have given them the confidence that they did minister to the Lord when they should have?

Who are “the least of these” (verses 40 and 45) to whom Jesus was referring at the time he gave this parable? (Least is a good translation, but smallest would also be a good one.) Who might “the least of these” be to us? Is it easy for us to recognize “the least”? Why or why not?

Are we likely to be surprised by the results of the last judgment? If no, why not? If so, how?