

Johann Gerhard, one of the great pastors in our church's history, has a memorable quote that summarizes what Jesus teaches in our Gospel reading. In one of his devotional writings, he writes, "God promises pardon for the penitent, but He does not promise tomorrow." This parable is a stern warning, but one that Jesus gives to His people out of love. And so out of love for Jesus, and for our neighbors, we must heed what our Lord tells us.

This parable comes toward the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry, two days before He would be delivered up to be crucified. His teaching to His disciples becomes very urgent, even forceful, as He tells them what they need to hear before He goes to the cross.

So here, Jesus tells them that the Kingdom of Heaven is like ten virgins invited to a wedding feast. These virgins represent the visible Church on earth, all those who claim the name of Christian. Our Lord then tells us, "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise." Within the visible Church, there are those who are wise, truly fearing, loving, and trusting in God, and there are those who are foolish, those who do not truly fear, love, and trust in God.

This wisdom – or foolishness – is a thing of the heart, on the inside, but it does produce fruits that can be seen on the outside. In the case of the parable, Jesus says, "For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps."

Though our Lord doesn't explain exactly what the burning lamp and the oil are, it seems to me that the burning lamp, the flame, is faith, and the oil is that which keeps faith alive. The Bible teaches that faith is a living, active thing, like a flame. And faith is kept alive through God's Word, through absolution, and through the Lord's Supper. These are the oil.

While the virgins are waiting for the feast to start, the bridegroom is delayed, and they aren't sure exactly when he'll be arriving. Jesus, the bridegroom, has ascended into heaven, and we are now waiting for the day when He returns in glory to gather His people to Himself and bring them into His eternal feast. But, we don't know when that day will be. We know neither the day nor the hour, as Jesus says.

As the bridegroom is delayed, Jesus tells us that the ten virgins "all became drowsy and slept." As we wait for the return of Jesus, we will become drowsy, our bodies will eventually fail, and we'll fall asleep in death. It has happened to every Christian since the day Jesus ascended, and it will very likely happen to you and me as well.

But the sleep doesn't last. Jesus says, "But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps." The herald's cry awakens all the virgins, foolish and wise. Likewise, the Bible teaches us that, at the coming of Jesus, every single person who has ever lived will be raised from the dead.

Yet though all will be raised, what awaits after the resurrection will be very different for different people. When the wise virgins wake up, their lamps are able to continue burning because they brought along spare oil. With lit lamps, they are able to enter when the bridegroom invites them in.

On the other hand, when the foolish virgins wake up, they realize that their lamps have gone out, and they don't have any oil to refill. The wise are unable to share with them, and so the foolish set off in a futile search for oil. When they return, it's too late. The door to the feast has been shut, and it will not be opened again. The foolish virgins pitifully call out at the door, but are answered with words of judgment: "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

These are somber words from Jesus, and rightly so, because they point to the reality of the judgment. At some point, you will fall asleep in death. At that moment, if you have faith in Christ – a living, active faith – then you will be taken from this life into the glory of heaven. And then at the resurrection at the Last Day, your body will be raised and you will dwell in the perfection of the new creation for all eternity. It is quite literally the best thing that can happen to you.

On the other hand, if you die apart from Christ, if you allow your faith to grow dimmer and dimmer and finally go out, then only darkness remains. Those who die without faith in Christ will find the door to paradise shut. They will hear the Lord whose grace they took for granted tell them, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." And that will be the beginning of the worst thing that can ever happen to a person. The beginning, because it marks the beginning of the rest of eternity spent apart from God, an eternity of darkness, pain, sorrow, and regret.

It's a somber parable, one that sets you back, gives you pause, if you consider it seriously. And yet Jesus tells it to us out of love. He loves His people and desires that none be left out in the eternal darkness. Remember, the bridegroom had invited all ten virgins to his feast. And Jesus also knows our sinful nature, and knows that sometimes this is what we need to hear. Several reasons for why we need to hear this stand out.

The first reason that such a parable is necessary is that our sinful nature is prone to weakness, especially as time goes on. There are times when our faith burns particularly bright, maybe when we first come to the faith, or after our Lord blesses us in a particularly amazing or even miraculous way, or after the Holy Spirit has graciously breathed upon the flame of faith in our hearts and stirred it up again.

Yet as time goes by, and the excitement wears off, we are tempted to decline in our life of faith. We become lax in our prayer, in our reading of the Bible. We find more and more reasons to miss church, or to just zone out and go through the motions when we do attend. The flame of the lamp grows dimmer, and we refill the oil less and less. Thus, Christ gives us this stern warning, that we would not take His gifts for granted. He desires to wake us from our spiritual stupor while there is still a flame present, while there is still time to get oil.

A second reason that our Lord tells this parable is to remind us that judgment is final. This parable isn't the only place where God teaches this. As one example, consider St. Paul's words from

our Epistle reading. “While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”

And yet even though this teaching is clear, our sinful flesh hates it. We want there always to be another chance, another occasion when grace will be given. We want there to be a tomorrow so that we can repent tomorrow for the sin we want to commit today. This is where false teachings like Roman Catholic Purgatory and Mormon missionaries to the dead come from. They provide comfort, but it is a false comfort contrary to the clear words of Scripture, and so they are no real comfort at all.

As the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” Christ tells us this parable so that we do not take the time of grace for granted, because that time will not last forever.

A third reason our Lord tells us this parable is so that we can be better equipped to tell and warn others. Telling people who are in church that they need to be in church might seem rather unnecessary, but it is important, as we’re all constantly tempted. Just because you’re here today doesn’t mean that Satan won’t tempt you next Sunday. In fact, I guarantee you that he will! This parable serves to drive back the temptations that constantly attack us.

But in addition to that, these words of Christ help strengthen us to call to those who haven’t been in church, who haven’t purchased oil for their lamps from the shop in a while. If the only reason we have for inviting people back to church is sentimentality, “We’ve sure missed you,” then that isn’t a very strong reason. Sure, it’s nice, and we should miss our brothers and sisters in Christ when they are absent. But you could see them while doing your grocery shopping, or at community events, or even go out to lunch. Why does church matter?

This parable reminds us that, though God is present everywhere, there are only certain places He has promised to be to forgive sins and strengthen faith: His Word and His Sacraments. Only certain merchants sell oil, to use the parable’s language.

More important than our concern for seeing someone for an hour or two on Sundays should be our concern for having them with us in the Kingdom of Heaven for eternity. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and love – true, divinely-given love – desires what is best for others, not just making them feel good. Remember, our Lord tells gives even His words of stern warning out of love.

And so, as you wait for the coming of the Bridegroom, keep the lamp of your souls burning with the flame of faith. The warmth of its glow will drive back the darkness that is falling, and its light will be a beacon to others. Though you can’t know when the Bridegroom will arrive, you can keep the flame lit until He arrives.

In the name of Jesus, amen.