

In the last discourse, or section of teaching, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus focuses on signs of the end times and of His second coming. Not only does He give signs of the end times, like we heard last week, but He also gives warnings. Today's Gospel reading is one such warning. And the severity of the warning is found in how unexpected the danger is.

What do I mean by that, that our Gospel text speaks of an unexpected danger? It's true that the tribulations Jesus spoke of last week take forms in our day that we may not expect. But there's a couple things to note about those tribulations, and about what we usually think of when we imagine end times troubles.

A big thing is that those tribulations all come from outside us. Everything from persecution to natural disasters to illnesses to wars, they're all problems or trials that are outside, that come to us. This includes many of the end times events in Revelation that cause people so much concern - things like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or the seas being turned to blood, or demons being let out of the abyss. All terrifying, for sure. And all causing great suffering for Christians on the earth.

But the thing about these external tribulations, as awful as they are, is that our Lord has given us His unbreakable promise that such things cannot take us away from Him.

Remember Jesus' words from last week, about how the days of tribulation will be cut short, so that God's people are not overcome, and how He will strengthen us with the ability to resist the deceptions of the false prophets and their signs and wonders.

Think, also, of how we heard in Revelation 7 a few weeks back, about how the people of God on the earth are sealed with the seal of God Himself, marked and protected by Him.

Perhaps the greatest and most well-known of God's promises to His people concerning His preservation in the midst of trial comes from Romans 8. There we read, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Despite all the suffering that these horrible things can and do bring, they cannot separate us from Christ. Though His great victory on the cross, Christ has overcome even death itself, and those who are joined to Christ are joined to that victory as well. When faithful Christians die as a result of their tribulation, they are immediately brought out of their suffering into the perfect peace of heaven itself.

None of those trials mentioned in Romans 8, or Matthew 24, can force a person out of Christ's hand, and in fact our Lord often uses them to bring His faithful into His glorious presence.

What can separate people from Christ, then? That's the big contrast between last Sunday's Gospel and today's, what Jesus' warning is about. The greatest danger isn't something from outside, it's from within, the sin that dwells in our hearts.

Moving from teaching on signs of the end times, Jesus now gives a parable about ten virgins, waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. Christ is the bridegroom, and the virgins are the visible church, those who call themselves Christians. All ten virgins have been invited to the wedding banquet, all ten virgins have lamps that are initially burning, all ten fall asleep and are awakened by the herald's cry.

Thus all Christians are, by virtue of the word and Baptism, invited to the wedding feast of Christ and given the flame of saving faith in their hearts. All Christians will fall asleep in death at some point, and all will be awakened by the cry of the archangel and the heavenly trumpets announcing Christ's return in glory.

So, what sets the two groups apart? Jesus says, "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps." The difference is within them, five being foolish and five being wise.

And this inner difference leads to an outer difference in their actions. The wise ones bring extra oil. Will they need it? Maybe. Maybe not. But being able to meet the bridegroom, whenever he comes, is so important to them that they choose to bring extra along, just to be sure.

The foolish, on the other hand, don't have any extra oil. And again, here's the important distinction. Why don't they have extra oil? Is it because someone stole it? Is it because the king's soldiers came and threw them in jail until they gave up their oil? Is it because an earthquake happened and their oil jars fell and shattered? No, there's no external reason why they don't have extra oil.

It's because of their own decisions, their own foolishness. Being prepared to meet the bridegroom wasn't their top priority. Their lamps were burning for the moment, so why waste time and money on getting extra oil? They could spend the time they'd wait in line at the merchant on doing something more enjoyable. They could spend the money on other things, on themselves.

But what happens? The bridegroom is delayed, and all the virgins – wise and foolish – fall asleep. When the herald's cry wakes them up, the foolish find out that their lamps are going out. Their estimation of "what's the minimum amount of oil I can have and still be fine" turned out to be wrong.

The wise cannot share their oil with the foolish, and as a final result, the foolish are shut out of the wedding feast. They stand at the door, crying out, "Lord, lord, open to us!" But what reply do they receive? "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." Their foolishness, dismissing the importance of being ready for the bridegroom, not treasuring the invitation they'd been given, prioritizing things other than keeping their lamps burning, this leads them to missing out on the wedding feast.

By the time they'd realized their mistake, it was too late. There was no second chance. The door is shut, and it will not be opened again.

This is the great warning that Jesus gives in the text. In this parable, as well the others in this discourse that speak of those who are condemned, it is never something from outside that tears faithful

Christians away from Christ. It is, rather, always something from within that leads to their destruction. It's a valuing of the things of the world over the things of God. It's looking for the minimum requirements, the lowest effort, to be saved.

One of the greatest dangers to Christians is apathy – not caring. This is connected to why this text is selected for the Last Sunday of the Church Year. As another year comes and goes, and Jesus still hasn't returned, we're tempted to go slack, to relax our watch.

And the world is all too happy to contribute to this. St. Peter, in his second Epistle, reminds the Church "that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.'" Already in the time of the apostles people were tempting Christians to doubt, saying that the world keeps on turning regardless of what you believe, if you're faithful or not.

This temptation, this process whereby faith is extinguished, looks a lot like a lamp slowly dying. The flame gets lower, and lower. You think, "I should really add some more oil," but then something comes up and you'll do it later, and you forget. Eventually you just have a barely visible flame, or maybe a smoldering wick. Once that final wisp of smoke goes up, the lamp is extinguished, and it doesn't matter if you put more oil in. The flame is out.

Or another illustration tied to the parable: you're driving, and you start to feel drowsy, but you figure that you'll be fine. Then you nod, and the jerk might wake you up for just a little, but then the fatigue sets in more. And the thing is, you're never actually aware of the moment you fall asleep. You only realize it when it's too late and the vehicle is rolling or someone is screaming, or someone is dead.

Faith dies in much the same way. You skip church because you figure you've been attending regularly, and missing every so often isn't going to hurt anything. Then missing becomes the regular thing, and you're only hearing the word of God once or twice a month. And if once month is fine, why not just several times a year? Or just Christmas and Easter – those are the big days, after all.

What happens in all this is that gradually, over years, or decades, or generations – the Lord and His gifts are slowly pushed further and further aside – first just for "big" things, but then for more common events, until eventually you just really don't feel like going this morning, and the Word of God preserved through the ages, the cleansing of all your transgressions, the very body and blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God, take a back seat to, what, getting to stay in your pajamas a little later than usual?

Like falling asleep, you might get those moments that jerk you awake momentarily, perhaps a serious illness comes, or someone close to you dies, and for a moment eternity comes near. But all too often, those events and the spiritual wakefulness they bring fade once more into spiritual slumber. And as with falling asleep, you won't actually know the moment faith dies. But your salvation will be lost all the same.

Don't let that happen to you. If you're drowsy behind the wheel, you pull over, and walk a few laps around the car, or rest momentarily where it's safe. If your lamp gets low, you add oil as soon as you notice it.

Or better yet, you just get in the habit of adding oil regularly. If it's a habit, then you don't have to worry about it. That's why God gives us the Third Commandment and its weekly frequency – the Sabbath is once a week. Our Lord doesn't command us to meet together once a week to receive His gifts because He just likes making arbitrary rules that we have to follow. He made us; He knows perfectly what humans are like and what is the best thing for us.

He commands us this so that we get into a habit, so that we are used to following the Holy Spirit's urging, rather than it being some strange or guilty feeling. We realize this is true for our physical lives – that eating healthy, exercising, getting enough sleep are all most effective when they're habits. Why would it be any different for our souls?

In addition to the weekly habit of attending the Divine Service, practice the daily habits of Scripture reading and prayer. God's Word is a treasure of infinite worth. It is the divine light of truth in a world filled with darkness and lies. It is God speaking words of comfort and hope in the midst of sorrow and loss. It is strength in times of weakness. It is divine wisdom, that makes the foolish wise. It is the sword of the Spirit, the weapon that drives back the devil himself. It is a picture of love – God's love – shown to sinners over and over and over again.

As you dwell in God's word, your own words then echo His. You learn to pray to God first by hearing what God would say to you, the same way children learn to speak by hearing their parents speak to them. In the Bible, the Lord gives you His own prayer, and many prayers said by Jesus, and the apostles, and the prophets, and even 150 different Psalms – which are prayers.

To grow in the Word is to grow in prayer. And to grow in the Word and prayer is to grow closer to God Himself. The Bible says, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you."

Remember, nothing outside you can snatch you away from the Lord. Nothing in all creation can forcefully extinguish the light of faith that God has given to you. Only you can do that. Don't let your oil run out, for the day is coming when you won't be able to get any more. Let your light shine, that by it you may see the coming of the bridegroom and rejoice in that day.

In the name of Jesus, amen.