

Matthew 25:1-13

For nearly 2,000 years Christian pastors have preached on this text, and for nearly 2,000 years the wise virgins have listened and have acted upon these words of Jesus; the foolish virgins have not.

Every pastor would like to believe that his congregation is made up of only wise virgins. But every pastor knows sadly that within the church, yes within every congregation, there are also foolish virgins. Jesus says so. This parable is not about non-Christians in the world; it is about Christians in the church. Matthew 25 does not speak of those who are of the world until the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Those who are outside the church--the goats--do not have lamps of faith. These ten virgins do. This parable does not discuss the fate of those who are not baptized into Christ. It tells us about those who are baptized.

All ten virgins had lamps. All ten, therefore, were baptized. All ten were members of the church. All ten had faith. But of those within the church who are baptized, taught, and confirmed, there are those who are wise, and those who are foolish.

If you are a wise virgin, then you will open your ears to Jesus' words this morning, and you will act on them. If you have been foolish, then through these very words God is calling you to turn away from your foolishness and be made wise unto salvation in Jesus Christ.

This parable does not give us a license to be judgmental. Jesus hardly wants us to be proud if we have been wise, and to look down upon those who are foolish. This is hardly the mark of a wise virgin. Even those who are wise deplore the foolishness within their own hearts. "*Claiming to be wise, they became fools,*" writes St. Paul in Romans. Wise virgins do not boast of their wisdom; they boast in Christ. Wise virgins do not judge themselves to be better than foolish virgins, but they pray for them and are always ready to help them in becoming wise.

In the parable we cannot see a difference between the wise and foolish virgins until the end when the bridegroom comes...except for one thing--the wise virgins had extra oil for their lamps, the foolish virgins did not.

The lamps are lamps of faith. But what good is a lamp if it has no oil? The fire within the lamp will not burn without fuel. It must have oil. What fuels our faith? What empowers it to burn so that our "light shines before men?" The Word of God, and nothing else.

You were given your lamp of faith in your baptism. And your parents promised to stock up your oil by teaching you Bible stories and by bringing you to church, and Sunday school, and catechism. As you grew older it became your own responsibility to keep storing up fuel for your lamp.

Nowhere in Scripture does God say that there comes a time when we graduate from reading and studying His Word. Nowhere does God say that we can relax our strict discipline of being in the pew and at His Communion Table. These opinions come from the devil. It is Satan who turns wise virgins into foolish ones. It is Satan who convinces us to put down our catechism and Bible, to put the earning of money always ahead of the gifts God gives in worship, to put the responsibilities of life ahead of our life-long training in the Word of God.

The five foolish virgins did not start out that way. But somewhere along the line they got into the habit of neglecting preaching and God's Word. Somewhere along the line they began giving excuses to justify the foolish choices they were making.

One of the biggest excuses foolish virgins give is that their lamp, even without oil, is all they need. "As long as I know who Jesus is and what He did, I have my lamp in place, and I will be ready." These are the words of a

fool. Faith is not simply knowing who Jesus is. Even non-Christians can have this kind of faith. Even the devil believes if this is all there is to faith.

The foolish virgins bang on the door of heaven in the parable, but it remains closed to them. “*Lord, Lord,*” they cry, “*open to us!*” They know Jesus. They call Him Lord. But He does not know them. “*I do not know you,*” He replies, and they spend eternity with the goats. A faith that is not fueled by the Word of God--the Gospel of Christ--is not faith at all, but is merely knowledge of Jesus within the head.

Foolish virgins in the pew listen to these words, but they disagree. They are not humbled by them. They do not repent and turn from their foolishness. They insist that they know better than all the Christian pastors who have preached this text for 2,000 years. They know better than Jesus what is best for their eternal soul.

Let none of us here today be so foolish. Satan may turn wise virgins into foolish ones, but God turns foolish virgins into wise ones. He does this through the preaching of His Word. God became a fool for our sake. “Through the foolishness of the cross,” says St. Paul, God saves sinners like us. The world calls what Jesus did on Calvary, foolish. And foolish virgins neglect that word of the cross. But through this powerful message of Christ Crucified, God is at work on our hearts.

There is no one here who has been so foolish that God is powerless to make that one wise unto salvation. God does not reject you or me because of our foolishness. He loves you. Christ died for you. God forgives you. He forgives you for your foolishness, and He will help you to live as His wise virgin.

How do wise virgins live? They heed the cry of the Bridegroom. “*At midnight,*” our text says, “*there was a cry. ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’*” Those who are wise are well aware that this cry will not just sound forth on the Last Day; it is sounding forth even today. “Here is the Bridegroom! Come out to meet Him,” are the words of invitation each and every Sunday morning. Here in the Sacrament on the altar is your Bridegroom. He is here in bread and wine for you. He is here as oil for your lamp. Here in the words of absolution spoken by the pastor is your Bridegroom. He is here with forgiveness for your sins. Here in church, and here in Bible study is your Bridegroom, as His words of life are heard and studied, and they are fuel for your lamp.

Ever since you were very little, you were taught where your Bridegroom is to be found--that He is in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and within His words of grace. You were taught that your Bridegroom loves you deeply, that He gave His life for all sinners--that He gave His life for you on the cross. You were taught that Jesus is your Bridegroom, and you were taught to be faithful unto Him as wise virgins.

If you have been less than faithful, Jesus loves you no less. You are just as precious to Him as His wise virgins who are faithful. Today He opens His arms in love to you. Do you see the marks of the nails in His hands? He was faithful unto death for your sake. And He will help you to live wisely so that when, on the Last Day, the cry goes out: “Here is the Bridegroom! Come out to meet Him,” you will, for your lamp will be filled with oil. Amen.