

The Oil of Faith

By Vicar Jake Zabel

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sermon text Matthew 25:1-13

¹*Then the Kingdom of Heaven shall be compared to ten virgins, who taking their lamps went to meet the bridegroom.* ²*And five of them were foolish and five wise.* ³*For the foolish, taking their lamps, did not take oil with them.* ⁴*But the wise did take oil in the vessels with their lamps.* ⁵*But in the delaying of the bridegroom, they all grew drowsy and slept.* ⁶*But in the middle of the night a shout came, "behold the bridegroom, go out to meet him."* ⁷*Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.* ⁸*But the foolish said to the wise, "give us some of your oil, because our lamps are extinguished."* ⁹*But the wise answered, saying, "No, lest there not be enough for us and you, go rather to the ones selling and buy for yourselves."* ¹⁰*And as they went away to buy the bridegroom came, and those who were prepared went with him to the wedding feast, and the door was shut.* ¹¹*Later the remaining virgins came saying, "Lord, lord, open to us."* ¹²*But he answered and said, "truly I say to you, I do not know you."* ¹³*Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know the day nor the hour."*

Lord sanctify us by your truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

In this parable we have ten virgins, or bridesmaids, waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, carrying their lamps. In Biblical times the groom and his companions would come to the house of the bride to take her to the wedding. The job of these bridesmaids was to give light to the bridegroom and his bride. Since there were no streetlights and very poor indoor lighting their job was to accompany the couple to the wedding hall. Then during the service and reception they would gather around the couple to make sure that there was enough light for both the couple to see and be seen by all the guests. Amongst these particular ten bridesmaids were five wise and five foolish. The Greek word here for foolish is *moros*, from where we get our English word "moron", thus it would be more appropriate to call them the five moronic virgins. Now, the bridesmaids have come out to wait for the bridegroom, the wise bring with them extra oil while the foolish ones bring what they deem to be enough. The oil, itself, would have been provided to the bridesmaids by the bridegroom. The bridesmaids had extra oil to bring with them, but the foolish ones, however, decided to leave their extra oil at home because they believed that their lamps would have enough. The bridesmaids came out to wait for the bridegroom, expecting him to arrive soon. But for whatever reason the bridegroom was late in coming, and so the bridesmaid drifted off to sleep, lamps continuing to burn. Around midnight a voice cried out, "behold the bridegroom, come out to meet him." This was most likely one of the groom's companions, possibly the bestman, calling out to the bridesmaids to have their lamps ready for the bridegroom is now here. The bridesmaids arose, ready to greet the bridegroom. They trimmed their wicks to allow the flames to burn bright. Now these lamps had been burning for hours. Ordinarily there would have been enough oil to last until at least the reception. But since the bridegroom had been late the oil in the lamps had ran out and the flames were extinguished. The wise bridesmaids had filled their lamps before the flame was extinguished and would have enough oil to last them for the rest of the night. But the foolish bridesmaids, these moronic virgins, had no oil to fill their lamps, and as their flames died they quickly urged the wise bridesmaids to hand over some oil. The wise bridesmaids refused. Now that doesn't seem nice, that's not very Christian behaviour, shouldn't they have shared the oil? No, the oil could not be shared, for if they were to split the remaining oil amongst the ten of them there wouldn't be enough to burn for the rest of the ceremony. It would be better to have five working lamps than ten lamps with not enough oil. So the foolish bridesmaids rushed off to quickly buy some oil. It is already too late for the bridegroom is here, but it is also midnight and no shops would be open. The bridesmaids rush from house to house desperately trying to find some oil, but all is in vain for there is no possible way to get oil this late at night. And while they were running around the bridegroom had arrived with his party of companions, he collected the bridesmaids who were prepared for his arrival. They collected the bride and headed off to the wedding. As for the foolish bridesmaids, they had been unable to find any oil. They decided, however, to go to the wedding anyway, but as they arrived they notice that the door is shut. They come to the locked door and bang on it demanding that it be opened to them. But the bridegroom comes to the door and says, "truly I say to you, I do not know you." These bridesmaids were not friends but hired servants, and so the bridegroom truly did not know who they were. Those who were waiting for the bridegroom had already been collected and had come in with the bridegroom. These five at the door had arrived accompanied from out of nowhere, as far as anyone knew they were uninvited guests attempting to sneak into the party. Unless they had come with the bridegroom they were not allowed to enter.

So what is this parable teaching us?

Matthew 25 contains three parables, the Ten Virgins, the Talents and the Sheep and the Goats. All three of these parables proclaim a similar message. All three of them are teaching us about faith and the 2nd Coming of Jesus.

In the parable of the Ten Virgins, the coming bridegroom is Christ. The bridesmaids who are awaiting his arrival are humanity. The foolish virgins are the nonbelievers, as Psalm 14:(1) says the fool says in his heart, "there is no God." The wise virgins are the Christians, as Proverbs (1:7, 9:10) says, "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD." The delay is the period time that we now live in as we await for Christ's Return. We are told the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, when we least expect it (Matt. 24:32-44, 1 Thess. 5:2, Rev. 16:15). The Return of Christ could happen at any time. But this parable of the Ten Virgins, warns us that the Last Day may be far off. The Apostles, the Church Fathers, Martin Luther and the Reformers all felt that the Return of Christ was close at hand, and we too are tempted to think the same. When we look around the world and see war and the perversion of God's Law and Order, and we see the falling away of Christians, we believe that the Last Day cannot be far off. But be warned my fellow-Christians, for you do not know the day or the hour. The 2nd Coming could be today or tomorrow or it could hundred years from now or even thousand years from now, if not more. The parable of the Ten Virgins warns us to be prepared for the Coming of the LORD, especially if the Coming is far off.

The oil in the lamps is faith. Those with the extra oil are those with a faith that lasts until the Return of Christ, while those without are those with a shallow faith that fades away. In the parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1-9,18-23) Jesus talks of four types of people, amongst those are those with a solid faith and those with a faith that does not last. The foolish bridesmaids are the seed that grew among the rocks, when they received faith from God they were enthusiastic. They were passionate Christians, but their faith was shallow, it had no root and no solid foundation to build upon. This faith would not and could not last. If Christ were to return quickly, before their faith had run out of oil, they could have been saved, but because He was long coming, they withered up and their faith died before He returned.

Then there comes a shout, "behold the Bridegroom, come out to meet Him." With the voice of an archangel a shout rings out from Heaven as Christ descends on the Earth and the Trumpet of God resounded throughout all of Creation (1 Thess. 4:16). Here comes the Bridegroom, the dead are raised and those of us who are still alive shall be caught up into the clouds and we shall meet the Lord in the air. The Bridegroom has come to bring those who were prepared into the wedding feast. He is here to gather those who have faith. For it is through faith alone that we are saved by Christ alone. For only those who accompany the Bridegroom can enter into Heaven.

As for the foolish ones, they will turn to the Christians and plead with them, "quick, give me some of your faith." But this is impossible, for no one can transfer their faith to another, everyone must believe on their own. I cannot believe for you, you must have your own faith in Christ.

Therefore, the foolish unbelievers will begin to run around looking for faith, looking for ways to please God. But it is already too late, the Bridegroom has already come. When you stand before the Judgement Throne of God that is not the time to start thinking about God. Grace is offered to us in this life, now is the chance to believe. If you reject the promises of God in this life, you cannot expect to receive them in the next life.

As Amos said in our first reading (5:18-24), they will be like a man fleeing a lion only to be met with a bear. They will try to flee the wrath of God but will only run further into damnation. They will attempt to please God, but it won't work. Though they offer Him burnt offerings and grain offerings He will not accept them, nor will He have regard for their fattened peace offerings. They will attempt to sing His praises but He will not listen. This is because they do not have faith. They think they can please God with their own works, but before God our works are nothing but filthy rags (literally menstrual rags) (Isa. 64:6).

If the oil is faith, then the flame is good works. For as Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven." Our works are the light that shines and gives glory to the Father. Just as the bridesmaids stood around the bridegroom and their lights shone to give him the glory.

Our good works are evidence of our faith, just as the flame was evident that there was oil in the lamp. No flame meant no oil. Just as the lamp could not burn without oil, so too good works cannot exist without faith. Now, people without faith can do "good works", for even unbelievers can love their neighbour (Matt. 5:46-47, Luke 6:32). But without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Without faith our good works are nothing before God, because it is not the works that please God but the faith behind them.

When the Bridegroom comes He will find faithful Christians, their lamps will be burning for they have the oil of faith. But those without faith will be running around, fearing God's wrath and desperately trying to light their lamps. They will attempt to get their lamps burning but without faith the lamps will not burn.

Now, for you, my dear fellow Christians I urge you, keep awake, for you do not know the day nor the hour. Do not be like the foolish bridesmaids who believed that they had enough oil.

The oil was given to the bridesmaids as a free gift from the bridegroom, so too we have received faith as a free gift from Jesus Christ, our Bridegroom.

There are foolish Christians, moronic believers who believe that they have enough faith. "I was Baptised," they say, "I was confirmed. I go to Church once a month or once a year, that's enough. I read my Bible occasionally, that's enough."

Like the foolish bridesmaids these Christians neglect the gifts of God. Christ has given us so many gifts in order to give and to renew our faith. He gives us the Word of God so that we may read it daily and have our faith strengthened. He gives us the Sacraments to renew our faith. He gives us Holy Communion to feed our faith. He gives us Ministers to bring us the Word and Sacraments, to encourage us and to open our minds to the understanding of the Scriptures. He gives us the Church so that we may gather together around Word and Sacrament and be empowered and built up by fellow Christians.

All of these things are free gifts from God, that He has given us to sustain us until His Return. Therefore use them and cherish these gifts for the strengthening of your faith. These gifts of God replenish the oil of faith to keep our lamps burning until the Coming of the Bridegroom.

If we neglect these gifts, we put our faith at risk. If we do not feed your faith we will starve it. If we think that we have done enough, that we go to Church enough or that we read our Bibles enough, then we are like the foolish bridesmaids who thought that they had enough oil.

The wise man builds his house on a solid foundation so that it may stand, but as for the foolish man who built his house on sand, his house collapsed (Matt. 7:24-27). If our faith is not built upon a solid foundation it will collapse, and like the seed growing on the rocks our faith will wither away because it has no root.

In Mathew 7:21-23 Jesus said “not all who say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will be saved.” Many will stand before the Gates of Heaven and cry, “Lord, Lord, open to us.” But the Lord will respond, “I do not know you.”

Just because you call yourself a Christian doesn’t mean you’re saved, just because you were Baptised or Confirmed or go to Church once a year, doesn’t mean you have faith.

Our works do not save us. The Sacraments are not works that we do. We are not saved by the mere performance of Baptism and Communion. We’re not saved simply because we finished reading the Bible, or because we came to Church and sat in the pew. We are justified by faith alone. Faith in Christ is what saves us. And it is through the gifts of Word and Sacrament, through the Ministry and the Church that Christ gives us this saving faith as a free gift.

I urge you, do not neglect or reject the gifts of God, but receive them in faith with thanksgiving and praise. For Christ has given us these gifts as a solid foundation for our faith. Come to Church. Gather together around these gifts of Word and Sacrament. Hear the Word preached for the strengthening of your faith. Be baptised for the remission of your sins. Come to Holy Communion. Take and eat, take and drink for this is the Body and Blood of Jesus shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

The flame of salvation is fuelled by the oil of faith which you have received from the Bridegroom as a free gift. Do not neglect this flame but continue to fuel it with the gifts that Christ has given for you.

Christ has died and risen again for our salvation, and God will raise up all who fall asleep in Christ. At the sound of the Trumpet of God the dead will be raised. Christ will descend from Heaven and those who believe in Him will be called out to meet Him in the air. The Bridegroom will come and those who are ready will go with Him into the wedding feast. Amen.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the Bridegroom, strengthen and preserve you ‘til life everlasting. Amen