

**In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen**

**Last Sunday of the Church Year (2022)**

**Are You Ready to Honor the Bridegroom when He Returns?**

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*“Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25:11–13, ESV)*

Today is the celebration of the Last Sunday of the Church Year and as is fitting the Readings for this Sunday direct our attention to the Last Day, the Day of the Resurrection. Therefore, our celebration is not just for the last day of the Church Year, but for the Last Day of this corrupt world as our Lord Jesus returns ending the sufferings of the children of God. On that Day, all who are in Christ shall be resurrected to new, immortal, and incorruptible bodies to live forever in the new heaven and the new earth which God shall create as this old, corrupted world is changed, as a caterpillar is changed into a beautiful butterfly, a godly metamorphosis of this ugly generation into indescribable beauty, where the Church shall sit as welcomed, invited guests at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

The Gospel Reading for today, the parable of the ten virgins, is a parable about the church. In this parable Jesus provides us a glimpse of one of the tragedies of that Last Day, the tragedy that not everyone who believes they are members of the church will be invited into the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Jesus points us to the tragedy that not all who believe they are people of faith are people of Saving Faith.

Here we see the tragedy for what it is, far too many who call themselves followers of Christ have fallen prey to the obscurity of false teaching. Teaching that is murky at best and downright false at worst. Teaching that denies the truth of God’s grace in Christ, teaching that denies Saving Faith as justifying faith. Teaching that creates a synergistic faith, one that says I must help Christ save me. Sadly, those who fall prey to such teaching are represented by the five virgins who lack oil for their lamps.

Our Lord’s parable of today’s Gospel Reading is an end-time discourse regarding the kingdom of heaven which is set in the theme of a wedding. Our Lord Jesus begins by telling us there were ten virgins who went to greet the Bridegroom. Now there is no question that the Bridegroom is Christ and there is a delay in His coming. This delay represents the time from our Lord’s ascension into heaven until His return to earth on the Last Day. That is, the time of the Church and the ten virgins represent the community of those who claim Christ as their Lord, that also is the Church. Among these ten virgins are five who are wise and five who are foolish.

Now the fact that there is a division among these virgins shows that among the visible company of those who call themselves disciples of Christ, not all of them will be found to be true followers of Christ when He returns. Thus, in this parable Jesus is warning His followers to remain vigilant against the possibility of falling away and not being ready or able to honor Him when He returns. Now you might ask how can this be? How can one call themselves a Christian and yet not be a true follower of Christ, how can they not be ready for His return? For an answer to this question let us examine the parable more deeply.

The first thing we notice is the division, five brought oil for their lamps as they wait, and five neglected to bring oil for their lamps. Now there have been numerous explanations for what the oil might represent. Faith seems to be the most popular, and I won't argue with that. But for me it's not faith by itself which the oil represents, but it is Saving Faith. Faith that is built on the divine Word of God, Holy Scripture and not faith built on the words and understanding of men. That faith which I call "conditional faith."

The faith of the five foolish virgins is a faith that seeks to evolve, a faith that focuses on stepping out of the mainstream, a faith that rejects conformity to traditional, liturgical Christianity, a faith that rejects creeds and focuses on deeds, a faith that rejects the Church's understanding of the Sacraments and therefore God's Means of Grace, a faith that wants to get radical for Jesus at the expense of the truth of Holy Scripture, a faith that rejects historical grammatical interpretation of Scripture while clinging to the historical critical interpretation of Scripture, a faith that desires to merge with the culture, to be relevant in the eyes of man more than being relevant in the eyes of God. It is a faith more focused on pleasing self than pleasing God. This is the faith of the enthusiasts who seek new revelations, it is a faith based on feelings and emotions, on personal experience, it is a faith that is delusional, one that rejects being created by the Gospel. This is the faith of the five foolish virgins. A faith that is based on the rudderless ramblings of poor or faulty theology, a faith that has no sustaining power, a faith that will be found wanting on the Last Day.

But the faith of the five wise virgins is different, it is a faith which kept their lamps burning as they waited to meet the Bridegroom and enter the wedding hall. Theirs' is Saving Faith, a faith whose object is Christ and His vicarious atonement on the Altar of the Cross. It is a faith which relies solely on the promises of God's grace as revealed in the Gospel. It is faith of the one who puts their trust in Christ alone as their Savior from sin, death, and the devil. Saving Faith is justifying faith, a gift given and received as it is worked into the heart of men by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Gospel. (Rom. 10:17) It is faith that embraces the assurance of the promises and the grace of God in Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. Saving Faith believes in the doctrine of justification, the Scriptural truth that man is justified by faith alone, as St. Paul says, "***For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.***" (Romans 3:28, *ESV*)

Saving Faith cleaves to a method of justification not heard of among men. Man wants to be a part of the reason for his salvation, but Scripture tells us it is God alone who justifies men without the work of the Law. St. Paul reminds us it is God, "***who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.***" (1 Timothy 2:4, *ESV*) thus God wants man to be certain of the forgiveness of sins and not to glory in himself. He wants men to know that they cannot obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness before Him by their own merits, works, or satisfactions. God wants men to know that they receive the forgiveness of sins and become righteous before Him solely by the merit, work, and satisfaction of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. When man is brought to Saving Faith, that faith which believes that Christ suffered for all on the Altar of the Cross, and that for His sake God forgives our sins and grants us righteousness and eternal life, he is saved. It is as St. Paul said in his letter to the Romans, "***To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,***" (Romans 4:5, *ESV*) This is the faith of the five wise virgins.

So the ten virgins go to meet the Bridegroom, and as they wait they become drowsy and fall asleep, then, without warning, at midnight, someone shouts, "The Bridegroom is coming!" If the ten had been awake, they would have seen Him coming, for Jesus tells us when He returns it will be, "***as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man . . . Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the***

*tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:27, 30, ESV)* Moreover, we’re also reminded of the words of St. Paul to the church at Thessalonica regarding the coming of Christ when he wrote, *“For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 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.” (1 Thessalonians 5:2–3, ESV)*

Immediately the five foolish virgins know they are not prepared, their lamps are out of oil. Although they seek some from the five wise virgins, there is none to be spared. Knowing no other recourse, they go in search of oil for their lamps, but it is too late, in their absence the Bridegroom arrives seeking those who already have Saving Faith. Thus, He takes the five wise virgins with Him into the wedding feast and closes the door to all others. Many were invited, but only those who kept the wedding invitation in its original condition, who *were Ready to Honor the Bridegroom*, were allowed in. Only those who had true Saving Faith.

Not long after, the five foolish virgins return seeking entrance, crying, *“Lord, lord, open to us.”* But Jesus says to them, *‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’” (Matthew 25:11–12, ESV)* These words remind us of our Lord’s warning as recorded in the gospel of Luke. There, He says to those who would enter the marriage feast, *“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out.” (Luke 13:23–28, ESV)* Entrance through the narrow door requires Saving Faith, faith which comes from the Gospel and not from the foolish words of men.

Jesus warns us, saying, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Matthew 7:15, ESV)* And again, He warns, *“Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:11–14, ESV)*

*“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25:13, ESV)* You know not the day or the hour of the Last Day or of your own death, that is when you, too, will meet the Bridegroom. Do you want to hear Him say to you, *“I do not know you”*? I would suspect not. Therefore, if these are not the words you want to hear when you come face to face with Jesus, but you would rather desire to hear Him say, *“Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:21, ESV)* then shun the wisdom of men and seek the truth of God’s Word. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit spoken through the writings of the apostles, especially listen to St. Paul when he tells you, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:11–14, ESV)* And the voice of St. Peter, who said, *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12, ESV)* That name is Jesus Christ, the Son

of the Living God. Therefore, if you desire true Saving Faith, listen to the Word of Christ, the Gospel. (Rom. 10:17) In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.