

Matthew 25:1–13
Last Sunday of the Church Year
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
November 20, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, and at the end of the year we focus on the end of the world. As one cycle ends and another begins, as one season turns into the next, and the next, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, the LORD teaches us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom (Ps 90:12). We learn to understand that the years come and go as generations enter the grave; that every breath we take is one step closer to death. Whether Jesus returns in a few days or years, in a few centuries or millennia doesn't matter all that much, because regardless of when Jesus returns, we are told: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." You don't know the day or hour of your death and you don't know the day or hour of Christ's return, so be ready at all times. That's the message of this morning's parable of the ten virgins.

When you go to visit cathedrals and other medieval churches throughout Europe, you will often find depictions of the ten virgins in the archway over the entrance to the church. Christ is usually seated at the center, on his throne of judgment, the five wise virgins with their flasks of oil at Jesus's right hand and the five foolish virgins with their empty flasks turned towards the ground at Jesus's left hand. Such depictions were a visual reminder to those entering the church to watch, because you know neither the day nor the hour of our Lord's return.

Another reason you find these depictions of the ten virgins over a church's entrance is because that's where medieval weddings would be held. The bride and groom would meet at the

entrance to the church where they were married by the priest before celebrating a wedding mass and receiving a blessing at the altar. The actual wedding ceremony occurred under the depiction of the 10 virgins, showing what all earthly weddings point to: the marriage between Christ and His bride, the Church. Sometimes even Christians are scared of Judgment Day and our Lord's return. But Judgment Day is not all about fire and brimstone and the revealing of sins. Judgment Day is when our LORD Jesus Christ comes to fetch us, His bride, to live with Him for all eternity. Judgment Day is a day of wrath for those outside of the church. But for true Christians, the End of time is simply the beginning of the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb.

So what's the difference between the wise and the foolish virgins? On the surface there really isn't much difference. All ten virgins have their lamps out and are excitedly waiting for the groom to arrive to lead them into the wedding hall. All ten, representing the entire visible church, are anticipating the return of our heavenly bridegroom, Jesus Christ. With longing they await the eternal wedding feast, the heavenly banquet with old family and friends, the joy of eternal life. All those who profess to be Christians, those who make up the visible church, are looking forward to eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. All ten virgins fall asleep awaiting the bridegroom.

But a similar hope does not necessarily mean a similar hope fulfilled. There's a distinction between the virgins that you can't see on the outside, a distinction that is the difference between eternity in Heaven and eternity in Hell. The wise virgins who enter eternal life have oil for their lamps. The foolish virgins do not have oil. So what is this oil? Is it a magic elixir? Some holy grail or fountain of youth? No, the oil represents the one thing necessary, something that you can only have for yourself, something you are not able to give away, even if

you wanted to. The oil in this parable represents faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in what He has done for you, by dying on the cross for your sins.

What we learn about faith in the parable of the ten virgins is the urgency of acquiring and strengthening faith right now. You can't afford to wait. There is a time to buy oil and there is a time to strengthen your faith. Now is the favorable time. Now is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2). Many of those baptized into the Christian church make the mistake of neglecting their faith. They wrongly assume they will have plenty of time to study God's Word later, to repent of their sins and receive forgiveness, to pray, and to concentrate on the things of God. The cares of this world get in the way and people become distracted by work, family problems, and living for the moment. Even many who come to church can drift into coming simply out of habit, and then let their minds wander about from earthly care to earthly care while internally neglecting the preaching of God's Word. Many who are members of the church outwardly are in danger of running out of oil; they are in danger of letting faith die.

The shame is that there's plenty of oil to go around and it's all completely free. Our LORD works abundantly to strengthen the faith He has given us. He gives us His Word, and His Holy Spirit that we might rightly understand that Word. God gives us the gift of Holy Baptism, new life in the body of Christ. God forgives our sins in the Absolution and in the Lord's Supper. Our Lord places us into a community of believers where we hear God's Word proclaimed and where we discuss God's Word regularly. God gives us pastors and teachers, family and friends to encourage us in the faith and warn us about dangers to the Christian life we might not be aware of. God works through His Word in so many different ways to preserve us in the Christian faith. He makes sure we have plenty of oil for our lamps to meet the Bridegroom when He returns. God strengthens us, preserves us, and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. The oil of

faith is abundant and free. Those who pursue this faith by believing God's promises are wise. Those who neglect this faith in unbelief foolishly gamble away their eternal inheritance for a few years of supposed happiness in this life.

As the bridegroom delayed, all ten virgins, both wise and foolish, became drowsy and fell asleep. In Scripture, death is often referred to as sleep. Old Testament patriarchs and kings are said to "sleep with their fathers." Jesus said of a little girl who died that she did not die, but is asleep. The Prophet Daniel looks ahead to Judgment Day, prophesying that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Death is like sleep. Everyone who dies is in a sense asleep until Judgment Day. But in the middle of the night there is a cry: "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Those who sleep, that is, those who have died, will awaken from their graves on the day of Judgment. Those who endured to the end, who received God's blessings in this life, will then enter into eternal life. Those who neglected the faith in this life, those who never had any oil or those who let their oil run dry, will be cast into outer darkness.

The warning here is severe. There's much at stake and many people who do not trust in Jesus will hear those awful words; "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." But the joy of eternal life that will be ours could not be any sweeter. As Christians, we await not the judge coming to sentence us. No, we await the bridegroom, coming to take us to our eternal dwellings. Jesus went to prepare a place for you, and He will come again to take you to Himself, that where He is, you will be also (John 14:3). You, the Church, are the Bride of Christ. Jesus gave Himself up for you, that He might sanctify you, having cleansed you by the washing of water with the

word, so that He might present you to Himself in splendor, without any spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that you might be holy and without blemish. You have washed your robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, and so you are prepared to enter the wedding hall when the Bridegroom returns.

Now is the time of grace. Now is the time to repent of your sins and receive God's forgiveness. Now is the time to act wisely by concentrating on the eternal realities of God's Word. The end of your life or the end of the world could come at any time, and then comes the judgment, so watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour. The Bridegroom is calling to you. Today, if you hear His voice, do not foolishly harden your hearts. Rather, act wisely by holding to the original confidence you have, firm to the end (Heb 3 & 4). Look carefully how you walk, not as the foolish virgins, but as the wise virgins, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil (Eph 5:15–17). Exercise your faith now, store up for yourselves the precious oil of God's holy Word and Sacraments, the means the Lord uses to strengthen your faith, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed (Rom 13:12). The Bridegroom is on His way and He'll be here before you know it. Amen. Come Lord Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.