

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Last Sunday – November 24, 2024
Matthew 25:1-13 – The Wise and Foolish Virgins
Rev Peter Wagner

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

The five wise virgins were praised for their wisdom, but you don't need to be very smart to know that if you're asked to stand as a bridesmaid or a groomsman at a wedding, you should do whatever it takes to not look foolish, to not embarrass yourself.

You double check the invitation for the correct address and time. You leave plenty early so you get to the wedding venue on time. You check and double check that you have all the right clothes. You make sure you bring a comb, and a nice card. Otherwise you're going to embarrass not only yourself, but also the bride and groom, who entrusted you with a responsibility when they asked you to stand up for them at their wedding.

And not only is it a serious responsibility, but it's also a wonderful deal. It's fun to be at a wedding, as a guest of honor. As long as you're not the maid of honor or the best man – then you have to give a speech – as long as you're just a bridesmaid or groomsman, you get to enjoy all the rewards for almost no effort. You don't have to say anything or do anything. You can just come to the party and have fun. So you don't want to mess it up. It's so easy to just do your small part and not embarrass yourself, and enjoy all the rewards.

And how much more does this apply to the wedding of the King, the marriage of the Lamb in his kingdom, to his holy bride, the church?

You are invited to the wedding of Jesus Christ. In fact, you are a guest of honor. And your job is even easier than the ten virgins, even easier than going out to meet the bridegroom and holding up some lamps. And yet, five of them failed. Actually, if you think about it, all ten dropped the ball. They all fell asleep.

Falling asleep is spiritual slumber. It's failing to be vigilant, failing to endure as Christians, however simple our job may be. And all ten fell asleep. Because all Christians fall asleep. It's hard to stick with the task, to stand firmly as honored guests and representatives of Jesus. Sooner or later, no matter how strongly we start off, however we dedicate our lives to Jesus and commit ourselves to him, everyone gets lazy. It's human nature.

But that's no excuse. We've got to fight. Fight against our sinful nature, against the drowsiness, against lazy habits. But just like with exercise, it's hard to build good habits. It's hard to discipline your body, but it's very easy to stop, very easy to slide back into laziness.

Strong Christian habits – habits of wakefulness and watchfulness – these are hard to learn. Reading and meditating on God's word daily. Leading your family in prayer for the church and for those in need. Examining yourself and your life according to the Ten Commandments, and confessing your sin. Going to church and Bible study and actively listening and paying attention and applying what you hear to your life – these are the habits of vigilant Christians. But like a vigorous exercise program, these are difficult habits to start, and even harder to maintain.

On the other hand, lazy habits are easy to slip into, as effortless as lying down and closing our eyes and falling asleep. Failing to come to church and read God's word, being quiet about our faith and not speaking up, forgetting what we were taught, not staying sharp in the catechism, not learning and memorizing Scripture.

So many Christians think studying the Bible and the catechism only belongs to confirmation class. They think that once they're confirmed they've put enough effort into learning about Christianity, they can just coast from now on. So they fall asleep. And before long, they've forgotten even the little they learned in confirmation, and it shows in their way of life.

That kind of thinking is spiritual slumber. And we all fall into it. All of us. Those who seem to be super-Christians that we admire, they're struggling with it too. It's human nature, it's part of the lifelong struggle against sin. So we need to fight.

But since we all struggle, on the day when the Lord Jesus returns, however hard we try, none of us will be found fully awake. We'll all be drifting off, in one way or another. We'll all be caught off guard, we'll all have something to be ashamed of.

But here's the thing. Five of the virgins were wise, and five were foolish. So Jesus is saying: I know you're all going to fall asleep, I know how weak you are. So at least be like the wise virgins, not like the foolish. Be self-aware. Know yourself and your weakness and laziness, and plan accordingly. Bring extra oil. Be smart. Prepare

yourself now, so that your lamp will not die out completely on the day of my return.

This is why you need to be coming to church now, and hearing God's word now, and confessing your sin and receiving absolution now, and receiving the Lord's Supper now. You need to be soaking in everything that God offers you now. Get plenty of extra oil, before you fall asleep, before the oil is used up.

Because the oil is whatever it takes to keep the lamps burning, whatever it takes to keep faith alive, until we die or Jesus returns, whichever comes first.

But oil is costly, expensive. And you cannot produce it for yourself. The oil to keep the lamps burning, to keep faith alive, it only comes from outside yourself. Yes, the only place to get oil is in the church. Here, the Holy Spirit is at work, to make his light of the Gospel shine forth.

Oil comes from the Holy Spirit, in the church, in his means of grace. To get enough oil to keep your lamp burning, so your light of faith does not die out, you need to be in church, being filled up constantly up by the Holy Spirit with his word and sacraments.

Because the day is surely drawing near, when the cry will finally go out, "Here comes the Bridegroom!" and we will all awake. Then the smart ones, who knew their own weakness and brought extra oil, the smart ones will be okay. But the foolish ones will begin to panic. They'll feel that awful sinking feeling in their gut – the same awful feeling you get in nightmares about forgetting to study for a test, or forgetting to put on clothes, or forgetting an important meeting.

Then their hearts will sink, because their lamps are going out, and they will realize – too late – the consequences of their lazy habits. They've failed their responsibility, bringing shame to themselves and the Bridegroom.

So do not be foolish, Jesus is saying. Do not be caught off guard. For you do not know the day or the hour. Be smart, and seek the oil you need to keep the light of faith burning.

Keep coming to church. Be filled with oil that you cannot produce, costly and valuable oil that you cannot afford, oil that God offers you freely and without price. Obey the summons of Isaiah 55, "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

You would be a complete fool to ignore such a gracious invitation, for then you would be found empty and faithless on the day that the heavenly Bridegroom returns to bring his people into wedding banquet. And then that awful feeling in your gut – the stuff of nightmares – it will be far worse than any dream, because it won't be a dream at all. It will be real. Because the door will be shut, with you outside. And if you cry out to Jesus, "Lord, lord, open to us," his terrible words will leave you in despair, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

All this, for Christians, is terrifying. What if I fall asleep? What if I run out of oil and get locked out? What if I'm not doing enough?

Do not be afraid. It's true, you aren't doing enough. None of us are. But Jesus has done it all. Your Bridegroom was stricken into death. He deliberately left his wedding hall of heaven and was locked out and sealed in a tomb for your sake, to purchase the church as his bride. And then on the third day, he arose and awoke, to waken us all from slumber.

So if this parable scares you, then good. Jesus wants to scare you a bit, for your own benefit. He wants to frighten you back into his church, to wake you up and keep you sober. And he wants to prepare you, by putting on the breastplate of his faithfulness and love, and the helmet of the hope of his salvation, not in your own efforts, but in what he's done for you.

Jesus does this all so that the terror of the foolish virgins will never be yours, so you will enter his wedding in the joy of the wise.

Therefore, if you are afraid of falling away, let the words of Saint Paul in our epistle from 1 Thessalonians 5 be your comfort. "You are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness... For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

Be encouraged, for you are not in darkness, you are children of the light.

So come into the light. Look to Jesus, by faith, day after day. Let the Holy Spirit trim your lamps and keep them burning. Let him bring you little trials and sufferings in this earthly life, to wake you up from spiritual slumber, to strengthen your faith, to open your eyes to God's mercy and blessings.

Let him open your heart to recognize your sin, and let him bring you into his church, week after week,

confessing your sin, and being strengthened and fed with his preaching and his word, and being forgiven, and receiving his body and blood in communion for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith, and learning better and better every day of your life to hope in his good promises, so that on that day you are not found foolish and emptyhanded, but wise and ready, with lamps burning, with oil enough and more, to joyfully meet the bridegroom and enter with him into his glorious feast that has no end. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.