

All ten of the girls in Jesus' parable have lamps. The term for girl is the same term for virgin. It represents outward innocence and purity. Perhaps it could be implied that any unmarried, teenage girl is also a virgin. Unfortunately, in our current climate, this is not the case. In the year 2022, the average age of losing one's virginity is around seventeen years old. And premarital sex has been the norm for decades. In a time when chastity is written off as old fashioned, we do well to pay attention to this parable of our Lord Jesus. Because this parable is written especially for us who recognize and oppose the immoral behaviors promoted in the culture. You see, the girls in Jesus' parable are all chaste, at least outwardly. They are pure. They represent all those who are part of the outward life of the church. It is a particular warning to all Christians who are keeping themselves out of trouble.

It is, of course, important for parents to warn their children against sexual immorality. No, the answer isn't so called "sex education" in which they learn to be "safe." We must warn them that those who defile the marriage bed will be judged by God. In the same way, we should warn them against becoming slaves to drugs, to violence, greed, and all sorts of other terrible things. But the one thing that is so easy to lose sight of is the importance of the oil in our lamps.

The oil in Jesus' parable is the Holy Spirit. We have been anointed by the Holy Spirit in our baptism, just as Jesus was anointed. He gave us faith. And with this faith, he also gives us hope and love. He gives us faith to believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake and that we stand righteous before God. He gives us hope to look forward to the coming of our Savior. And he gives us love to serve our neighbor, to encourage our fellow Christians, to admonish those who are straying, and to carry out the duties God has given us in this life. This oil is the only thing that will shine when Jesus returns. Hypocritical lip-service to God's Word will be shown to be a sham. Charity work, services, and donations not done by faith in Christ will be exposed as self-serving and prideful.

This is why Jesus describes five of these virgins to be foolish. Why? Because they don't bring enough oil with them in their lamps. In other words, they think little of the Holy Spirit who speaks through the Word of the Scriptures. They act as if it's a given that the gospel is always going to be preached, the church doors will always be open, and they will always be able to be associated with the outward fellowship of Christians. But when Jesus returns at a time when they don't expect it, there is no more time to take such things for granted. The doors are shut, and those who don't have light are left in the dark. And this is terrible darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We should not take this lightly!

The wedding feast in Jesus' parable represents the kingdom of heaven. He is the true Bridegroom who has claimed the church as his spotless bride. He gave his life up for her, cleansing her with his own blood. And he continues to nurture her with his gospel. We are members of God's kingdom, even here on earth. Here, as we gather around his gospel and sacraments, we are members of Christ's body, his holy bride, the church. Now, there are those who hear the gospel, take the sacrament, and maybe even sing some hymns, but they foolishly pay little attention to whether they even believe any of it. As long as the gospel is being proclaimed, as long as the message of Christ, who died for the sins of all people, is ringing out among his church, those who are foolish still have the door opened to them. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the acceptable time. This is because God is gracious and merciful. He wants all people to be saved. But don't fool yourself! At a time when you don't expect it, the day will come when the doors will be shut, and only those who are safely in will be saved.

The Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night after all the virgins have fallen asleep. Even the wise virgins fell asleep. Everyone gets tired. Everyone grows drowsy. In fact, this is why the wise virgins are called wise. It isn't because they are so good at staying away. No, they brought enough oil precisely because they weren't good at staying away. Those who pay attention to whether they have faith do so because they know how easy it is to fall into sin. They recognize how dark the darkness truly is. But the other virgins, as outwardly pure and polished as they were, are still called fools. They underestimate how dark the darkness truly is.

The other day I was watching a documentary about the controversy at the St. Louis Seminary from the 1960s and 1970s, which eventually led to the majority of the teachers and students leaving the seminary and starting their own seminary. Some of you likely remember these events very well. The documentary even featured Pastor Otten in which he gave a faithful confession that the Bible is true and without any errors. During the early 1970s the Missouri Synod had an investigation of the teachers at the seminary. They would ask them very basic questions, such as, "Were Adam and Eve real, historical people." The teachers would dance around the questions. The documentary also featured several of these teachers who had gone through these interviews. One of the teachers said that he had been asked if he believed Adam was a human being just like us. His response was, "No, because when Adam fell into sin, according to the Bible, it affected the whole of subsequent humanity; when I fall into sin it only aggravates my wife."

Now, I'm sure this man thinks he's being clever. But I can't think of a more foolish thing to say. Talk about underestimating the darkness of sin! The sin, which exists in your sinful flesh, is much darker than simply making your wife upset. It kills faith. It draws you away from the hope of salvation. It pushes love out of your heart. It is dark, darker than we can know.

The foolish outward members of the church are those who would treat sin and unbelief like petty, insignificant things. And they imagine their faith will glow brightly as long as they can keep doing churchy things. Maybe they can burn some incense, walk in processions, send their kids to Sunday School, participate in servant events, or whatever it is that makes them feel part of God's kingdom. But the only reason they seem to be glowing is because they are surrounded by other Christians. They are surrounded by those who are wise, who actually believe the gospel. These wise virgins' prayers rise up to God like incense, because they rely on Christ as the Holy Spirit intercedes for them. They walk in the light of God's Word, because they know that they constantly need the grace of their Savior Jesus Christ to protect them from sin and despair. They teach their children Bible Stories, reminding them of the gift given them in baptism, because they know that their children can easily fall away if they are not fed and nurtured by the gospel of their Savior. And they offer their service, because they know the love of Christ who became a servant to save them from their sins.

The wise virgins can't share their oil with the foolish virgins. It's not that they are unwilling. It's simply impossible. You can't believe for someone else. You can't have hope for someone else. You can't love for someone else. Of course, you should continue to bear with those who are weak, hopeful that they will rely on the Word of God with you, showing love to them the whole way. This is what God calls Christians to do. In fact, this is the oil, which fills our lamps. It is faith active in love, confidently hoping in what God has promised us.

Jesus' parable is, of course, a warning against neglecting what the Holy Spirit gives. Don't neglect his Word. Remember that you are not righteous before God by your own powers. Your sins are forgiven

not because of who you hang out with. You always need Christ who died for you and claims you as his own. You always need the Holy Spirit who strengthens your faith through the gospel and nurtures you with the body and blood of Jesus. You always need the hope of eternal life, especially when you have to suffer. And when you are tempted with anger and conflict, you always need God to pour his love into your heart. You need the oil given to you in your baptism. To know that you always need this is to be wise. It is to be honest. It isn't to be in the dark, but in the light.

And this is exactly what God has called you to. He has not appointed you to be condemned but to receive what Christ has won for you. He has made you children of the light. Walk in the light of his Word so that whether you are awake or asleep, you may live in Christ. Therefore, comfort and encourage one another with this truth. Amen.