

“Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” With these words, Jesus concludes what we call the Parable of the Ten Virgins. It’s a rather forceful and urgent command, not just a casual remark, and so we need to pay attention to it and understand it.

What are we watching for? How do we watch? What should happen if we neglect to watch? These are all addressed by our Lord in the parable. We will not know the day nor the hour, but we do know to watch.

So then, for what are we to watch? You have to know what you’re looking for in order to watch for it. What are the virgins in the parable watching for? The arrival of the bridegroom! They are guests, invited to to a wonderful event: a wedding! It’s a joyous occasion, the fulfillment of a promise of engagement, the joining of two together into one, the beginning of a new life, and it will all start at this wonderful feast.

And the bridegroom, or his father, has made all the preparations. They’ve sent out the invitations, gathered the supplies, provided the wedding garments. All these invited virgins have to do is stay ready, ready for that joyful announcement and arrival.

We Christians are watching and waiting for the arrival of our Lord Jesus. He is the bridegroom; the Holy Christian Church is His beloved bride. Their engagement has been a long time, first announced in the Garden of Eden. Invitations have gone out for millennia, as prophets, apostles, and evangelists proclaimed the bridegroom’s steadfast love for His bride and invited all nations to His wedding feast.

The bridegroom has prepared everything, Christ paying dearly – His own blood – to cleanse those invited and grant them garments of righteousness to wear in the eternal feast. And that feast – there will be nothing like it. Perfect peace. Endless joy. Complete fulfillment. A reunion with all those who have died in the faith.

And all of this will never end. Every earthly celebration must eventually draw to a close, and people have to return to their everyday lives, but the wedding feast of the Lamb will go on forever, each moment just as wonderful as the last, into eternity. In this marriage, Christ is joined to His bride, and they will never be separated.

This is what we are waiting for. This is what we’re watching for.

And so we wait, and we watch. It gets dark, but that’s okay, because we have lamps. The virgins all have lamps, as it’s implied the feast will start sometime in the evening, and you can’t watch for what you can’t see.

As Christians, we too have lamps, burning with the light of faith. Like your wedding garments, these burning lamps are also given to you in Baptism, when God the Holy Spirit kindles that flame of faith in your heart.

Just like the flame of the virgins’ lamps lets them look to the bridegroom, the light of faith is always looking to Christ, trusting in Christ, letting you see Christ and His gifts even in the darkness of this sinful world. By the light of faith, you watch for Christ, waiting for His return.

Yet lamps need fuel, oil to feed the flame. So too, faith needs to be fed if it's going to keep burning. What fuels faith? The Word of God and the Lord's Supper. When you hear the Word, it goes into you and is used by the Holy Spirit to sustain your faith. Your faith in Jesus is strengthened as you hear how He loves you and what He has done for you and how He has promised to care for you forever.

In addition to the Word, Holy Communion also feeds faith, with Christ giving you His body and blood to nourish your souls. Jesus is the light of the world, and so when you take Him into yourself, your light – which is His light – shines all the brighter. Communion is also a foretaste, a small sample of the greater feast brought out to those waiting outside.

This is all essential because again, as faith is a living thing, it must be continually fed. As it continues to burn, and as the darkness outside continues to grow and press in on those waiting, it is essential to continue to keep your lamp topped off.

As you wait, and as you watch, this filling of your lamp over and over can seem like a tiresome, tedious task. No doubt those virgins, especially the foolish ones, were often looking down at their lamps, wondering if they really needed more oil in there, or if they'd be okay for a little bit longer. Because, after all, it's a hassle to have to continually be checking, and buying oil isn't cheap, and if the oil's lasted this long then it should be good for a little while longer.

Here's the temptation for Christians, the temptation to foolishness. You believe. You have faith. You've been given that light in your Baptism. So do you really need to keep filling the lamp so often? It's lasted this long, hasn't it? Isn't it just a hassle to carry around more oil than you really need?

No doubt the foolish virgins had a laugh or two at all the extra work the wise ones had to do, wasting their money on unneeded oil, constantly adding more even though it's burning just fine.

These temptations are always present for Christians. Temptations to assume that, because you have faith now, you'll always have faith even if you neglect God's Word. Temptations to prioritize the things of this world – money and fun – and leaving the sustaining of your faith for whenever you have time. Or the temptation to assume that the oil in the lamp never gets used up, that because you know in your head the story of Jesus, that the faith in your heart will never be extinguished.

These are just a few. Your sinful flesh will raise a hundred different doubts or questions, and if you're even needing an excuse not to go to church and hear God's word, the devil and the world will always be there with a dozen or more different ones.

Perhaps the most deadly stumbling block is that we respond differently to our spiritual lamp than we would with a physical lamp. With an earthly lamp, as the flame gets smaller, you feel a more urgent need to add fuel. Hurry up before it goes out! However, as the flame of faith grows weaker and weaker, so too will your desire to add more oil. Those with the dimmest spiritual lamps are also those least concerned about adding more oil. A decreasing faith will be accompanied by increasing excuses and justifications.

Such excuses and reasons might continue, for a while. But not forever. Jesus says, "As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept." As the night goes on, these virgins naturally become tired and fall asleep. As your life in this dark world goes on, you will, because of your nature and its sin, enter the sleep of death.

Someday your eyes will close for the last time in this life. Maybe, like sleep, you'll gradually feel it coming on. Or perhaps it will be like a sudden fatigue that hits all at once and you're not even aware that you've nodded off.

As Jesus says, you know neither the day nor the hour. Maybe many years from now. Maybe before today ends. We always assume that we'll have tomorrow, that yes death is coming, but not now, not while I've still got stuff to do. Jesus tells us the opposite. You'll know neither the day nor the hour. You know only that it's coming.

Once you're asleep, your lamp is left out. Your soul departs while your body rests in the grave. You can't add oil or adjust the wick at that point. You're asleep. You're dead. Your watching has come to its end.

But you won't stay that way. The virgins, who had all fallen asleep, are awakened by the cry, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Similarly, at the Last Day, the angels and archangels will cry out, and the heavenly trumpets will sound, and the Son of Man will appear glorious in the heavens.

And He will call all people from their graves: believers, unbelievers, everyone. All will be brought back to life at His return.

The long-awaited moment will finally be here. The new heavens and the new earth brought about, the never-ending Day with no more night finally dawning, the glory of the Lord shining throughout the world. For believers, those who fell asleep with oil to spare, who died in the faith, the Last Day will mark the beginning of the unending celebration in heaven as they are invited into God's own banquet hall.

For unbelievers, though, this will be a moment that is anything but joyous. They will be like those five foolish virgins, startled awake, slowly realizing with increasing anxiety and fear that they have no oil.

They won't be able to borrow oil from others at that point. Faith only saves the one who has it. You can't believe for someone else, share you oil with them when you wake from the sleep of death.

The five foolish virgins set off to find more oil. Maybe they find some, maybe they don't. The point is, it's too late. Even if they did get some, the door is already shut. At the resurrection of all flesh, everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is God and Lord. They'll be looking at Him. But at that point, it will be too late to confess and believe. The door of His Father's house will be shut, never to open again.

Those outside, calling Him Lord, begging to be let in, will hear those awful words: "Truly I say to you, I do not know you." These words of judgment will be the last time they ever hear the voice of God before they are shut out in the darkness forever.

"Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." You don't know the day Christ will return. You don't know which hour will be your last on this earth. You know only that they are coming.

The bridegroom will return, and you must watch. Keep your lamp lit and filled with oil. Your Lord has given you your lamp and flame, and He supplies oil for free, filling you to overflowing. He will never fail to supply oil to those who ask for it, even sustaining it miraculously, as He did through Elijah for the widow of Zarephath.

He will never put you into darkness so deep you cannot endure; He has promised to never snuff out even the most dimly smoldering wick. As a Christian, you don't need to hear this parable and be afraid, for the Lord's promises are for you.

But when the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh tempt you to spiritual laziness and complacency, then keep this parable's warning in mind. Use the urgency it holds to share the Gospel with others, to warn those whose lamps seem running low or nearly extinguished.

While you can't force someone to get more oil, to hear God's Word, you can state the truth to them. You can tell them that only faith in Jesus, sustained by the Word and the Sacrament, will bring them into everlasting life. You can remind them that only Jesus is the light of the world. You can share those words spoken by Jesus, even as you hear them for yourself: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

In the name of Jesus, amen.