

In life, you're faced with all sorts of choices and decisions to make. How much thought goes into your decision depends on how important you think its outcome will be. For example, I really don't spend too much time deliberating on which pair of socks I put on in the morning, because it really doesn't matter; no one's going to see them anyways.

I'll spend more time thinking about what I buy for a Christmas present for someone because I want him to sincerely like it, and it's going to cost me money I won't get back, and Christmas only comes around once a year.

In the parable Jesus preaches in our Gospel text, our Lord is reminding us of the greatest, more important decisions we make, those things in our lives that effect where we spend eternity, which is somewhere you only go once.

Jesus begins the parable by comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to ten virgins waiting for a wedding feast to begin. They're waiting specifically for the arrival of the bridegroom, and they know he'll be arriving at night, so they bring lamps to give them light while they wait.

Here we have the visible church on earth, those who claim the name "Christian," represented by those ten virgins, all who are awaiting the return of Christ, the Bridegroom, who will take us into His eternal wedding feast. Now among these ten virgins, five are foolish, five are wise.

Before we talk about what makes them foolish or wise, note carefully that all ten have been invited to the feast. All ten possess burning lamps. Christ shows us here how His Father desires all to be saved. Christ shed His blood for all people, not just some. The Holy Spirit ignites the flame of faith in all who hear His Word and are baptized.

But, as Jesus continues the parable, we see that not everyone responds equally to being invited into the feast and given a burning lamp. Five of the virgins are foolish. What makes them fools? Jesus says, "When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them."

These virgins figure that, hey, they've got their invitations, and just a lamp is fine. They've got other things to do before the bridegroom arrives, things that are a whole lot more enjoyable than waiting in line to buy oil. And oil isn't cheap, you know. There are plenty of other things they'd rather spend their money on than boring old oil.

Besides, they've got their invitations, and their lamps are burning now. They'll be fine, they tell themselves.

These five foolish virgins represent those who are in the visible, earthly church but do not treasure the gifts Christ has given to them. They have been brought into the Kingdom at the invitation of the Lord. They have been washed in Holy Baptism, where they are given the white wedding garment of Christ's righteousness. There also at the font, God the Holy Spirit came to dwell within them, lighting the flame of faith in their hearts.

But then time goes on, and through the foolishness of sin they treasure these gifts less and less. Keeping your Baptismal robe white through confessing your sins and having them absolved isn't all that pleasant, and really, how white does it actually have to be to get in?

Spending time getting more oil to feed the flame of faith, hearing the Word preached, attending Bible studies, doing Bible reading and devotions at home – there are so many more enjoyable ways to spend your time!

And then money – tithing seems so legalistic, and again, it's much more satisfying to spend it on things you really want rather than supporting the Church. No, you were baptized and confirmed, you've satisfied the requirements as you see them. Why do extra? What's in it for you? You've got your invite, and your lamp is still burning – or at least smoldering – at the moment. Surely that's good enough.

Over against the foolish virgins, we have five that are wise. What makes them wise? Jesus says, "the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps." They too have been invited and possess burning lamps. But they are so glad to have been invited, so looking forward to attending this great feast, that they're going to do what they can to make sure they're prepared, regardless of when the bridegroom arrives.

Was it the most exciting thing they did that day, going to the oil dealer's shop? No, but if they all went together, they had great company. And if they're honest, it really didn't take that much time out of the day. And yes, their coin purses are a few shekels lighter now. But in their wisdom, these virgins know that it's all worth it.

What if it's really dark that night, with clouds covering the stars and moon, and they have to extend their wicks so that their lamps burn brighter and use up more oil? Or what if the bridegroom should take longer than anticipated? They don't know exactly when he'll get there, as travel back then isn't as easy or as predictable as today.

To these five wise virgins, the most important thing is being ready for the bridegroom's arrival, and so they're going to do what they can to ensure that.

These wise virgins represent those who, in the church on earth, treasure the gifts that God has granted them for the sake of Jesus. They, by the faith and wisdom given to them by the Holy Spirit, realize what a wonderful thing it is to be invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb, and they look forward to the day when the invitation becomes reality.

They seek to grow closer to the Lord who has invited them to know Him better by hearing and dwelling in His Word when they are given opportunities to do so. When they fall into sin and stain their robes of righteousness, they humble themselves and confess their sins, knowing that their loving Savior will hear their repentance and cleanse them from all unrighteousness. They devote themselves to lives of prayer and the pursuit of godliness, even when that means giving up some of the joys of this present age.

In doing all this, are they earning their salvation, their entrance into the wedding feast? Of course not! That is given as a free gift for the sake of Jesus and Him alone. But having been given this

gift, being rescued from eternal death and given life everlasting in paradise, they seek to hold fast to these treasures above everything else.

Jesus continues in the parable, saying, “As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.” Again, they didn’t know exactly when the bridegroom was coming, and he is taking longer than anticipated. As the night wears on, they become drowsy, struggling to stay awake and watch because of the long hours. And finally, one after one, they all nod off to sleep.

As the years of your life go on, you too will grow drowsy. Staying alert, watching for Christ, it will grow tiring, even exhausting at times, as this world grows darker and darker. It will seem more tiring to keep the light burning, more tiring to keep buying more oil, more tiring to live a life of faith against the temptations of this world as you wait for the coming of Christ.

And finally, on a day you don’t know, you will finally fall asleep into the sleep of death. All people, the foolish and the wise, share this fate. Unless we happen to be living in that day when Jesus returns in glory, every single one of us will close our eyes for the last time and take our final breath.

But this sleep doesn’t last forever. Jesus continues the parable: “But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’” At long last, he’s here! The moment long-awaited has finally arrived! And at this great exclamation, all ten virgins are roused from their slumbers, awake once more.

So it will be on the Last Day. The Bible tells us that Jesus will descend in glory from heaven, as clear and visible as lightning flashing from east to west. As He descends, the archangel will cry out, and the heavenly trumpets will resound over all the earth.

At the coming of the Great Bridegroom, all the dead will be called forth from their graves. Every single person who has ever lived will be resurrected and will behold with his own two eyes the King of Kings and Lord of Lords as He returns with the angelic hosts.

Yet this isn’t a moment of joy for everyone. When the foolish virgins wake up, they realize that their oil is spent, that their lamps won’t relight. They ask the wise for some of their oil, but there isn’t time; sharing oil at this point isn’t possible. In a panic, they’ll run off in a futile search for an oil dealer who would be open at this hour. It’s too late.

At the resurrection of all flesh, those who had been a part of the earthly church but had let their faith wither and die will realize all too late what their foolishness has cost them. Their faith will have died, and at this point it will not be given again.

How can this be? Once Christ returns, there is no faith, strictly speaking. The Bible tells us that, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” At Christ’s return, He is very much seen, and this fact isn’t something that’s hoped for, it is the present reality. You won’t need to believe in Jesus, because He’ll be gloriously visible for all to see.

His return is a source of fear and terror to those who had been indifferent before their death. His glory causes panic among those who died apart from faith, a panic like running through a dark town at midnight to find an open shop and at the same time knowing that such a thing is impossible.

For the wise virgins, there is no panic, though; only joy. They had been waiting for this moment, and it's here at last. Because they had valued it greatly and made sure to have extra oil, their lamps are once again burning brightly. When the bridegroom and his entourage arrive, the wise virgins are able to go out to meet him, and then as one great host enter into the joyful feast prepared for them.

For those who died in the faith, treasuring the fact that Jesus Christ had won eternal life for them at His cross, this awakening is one of pure joy. As Job had written, their redeemer lives, and they now behold him with their own eyes, standing before Him in their new, perfected flesh.

The glory of God is not terrifying for them, for they have been purified from sin, made holy as God is holy, and so they bask in His glorious presence, rejoicing as His pure goodness completely saturates their entire being, body and soul. The foretaste of the feast they'd been receiving in this life gives way to the fullness of the feast in heaven.

The Lamb in their midst shelters them, comforts them, gives them absolute peace. Whatever sacrifices and trials they'd endured in this life are completely forgotten in the joy of the new life. Their lamps are no longer needed, for they dwell before the face of God, whose light fills the new heavens and new earth. And this will all be theirs forever.

Yet Jesus doesn't end the parable there, and so we continue. "And the door was shut. 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.'"

Having returned, the five foolish virgins begin banging on the door, pleading with the lord to open to them. But the door is shut, and it will not be opened again. Even though the lord of the feast invited them, he does not know them, for their lamps have long gone out and now they are covered in total darkness. Their pleas do no good. The door is shut.

At Christ's return, those who died without faith in Him will cry out and plead to Him. They will acknowledge Him as Lord, not out of love but out of despair and terror. Even the demons will be forced to confess Jesus as Lord, but they will not be in paradise. The condemned will make all sorts of pleas in those final, terrifying moments.

"Lord, Lord, I was a really good person, and did better than other people!"

"Lord, Lord, I was only doing what everyone did!"

"Lord, Lord, science told me you weren't real, and because it gave me so many things, I believed it!"

"Lord, Lord, I was on the membership rolls of a congregation and even attended every once in a while!"

"Lord, Lord, my grandma and grandpa are in there!"

"Lord, Lord, I was baptized and confirmed!"

On and on they will cry out until the Lord silences them: “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” Terrifying words. Of course the Lord does know their identities. He knows everything.

But this is knowing in the intimate sense the Bible often uses, the idea of experiencing another in the deepest way. As these ones rejected the Lord and chose to know the things of the world instead of knowing Him, He no longer knows them. A bride who refuses to know her bridegroom prevents the bridegroom from knowing her. By her refusal, she has separated herself from him. And so, to those nominal, outward Christians, the door to heaven is shut. Forever.

Having told such a severe parable, what then does Jesus tell us to do? “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” The foolishness of the five was manifested in their belief that they’d always have more time, more time to get oil, more time with their lamps burning, more time they’d be able to stay awake. And by the time they realize their foolishness and its effects, it’s too late.

Those who are foolish in this life make the same mistakes, assuming that there will always be more time, more chances, more tomorrows. Likewise, by the time they realize the extent of their foolishness and its consequences, it will be too late. Being foolish in the sense of this parable has terrible – and eternal – consequences.

What to do then? Is it hopeless for those who are foolish – are the five and five set? No, not at all! Scripture contains this promise: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” God promises to give wisdom to anyone who asks for it. When you pray for wisdom, you don’t have to say, “It if be Your will,” because God has already said in His Word that it is.

However, this request must be made in faith. The next verse in James says, “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” Faith in Jesus is essential because, as James – and the rest of Scripture – declares, God’s wisdom is not the same as man’s.

It might not be what you want to hear. It might sound foolish to human reason. It might tell you to do things that will make your life on this earth a lot less enjoyable or comfortable. The wisdom of God will direct you to the things of God and away from the things of this life. And your sinful flesh will not want to give those up.

But when your flesh rears its ugly head like that, beat it back down with the Word, such as this parable our Lord gives. Remind yourself with Holy Scripture what is truly important, what is temporary and what is eternal. Pray that the Holy Spirit would grant you wisdom to rightly perceive such things. Receive the Word and the Sacraments to feed the light of faith in your heart, that it may burn brightly and that you may be prepared to enter into the joyous feast when the Bridegroom calls for you. Be wise, that you may find an open door.

In the name of Jesus, amen.