

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him! Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us! But he answered and said, Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming” (Matthew 25:1-13).

In this parable Jesus is giving us a warning to be ready for His coming, to always be prepared to meet Him, for we never know when we will leave this life. He wants us to be ready for him and not be surprised or stunned when He calls for us. He doesn't want us to dread His coming for Jesus dreads to be dreaded and this why He warns so often to watch and be ready.

In so many places in the Bible, Jesus and St. Paul tell us to be ready and to be watchful. In many places in the Bible, it tells us that Jesus will come by surprise at an “hour we do not expect” (Matthew 24:42, 44) and St. Paul says that Jesus will come as a “thief in the night.” (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

Despite Jesus's many, many warnings in the Bible on being watchful and being ready, most of us perhaps ignore this warning completely. What are the things that prevent us from being watchful and being ready to meet Jesus? What are the things in life that cause us to ignore these great and serious warnings of Jesus.

1. **Do Not Labor for the Food that Perishes** - One of the great reasons for not being ready to meet Jesus that that we often go through life “laboring for the food that perishes.” Jesus says in John, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you” (John 6:27).

A Christian traveler wrote about a recent trip he had taken to the pyramids of Egypt. He spoke about his experience as follows: “We gathered around the tour leader in the pyramid. ‘Look around you,’ the tour leader said. ‘At one time, this room glittered with inconceivable treasures. The kings entire life was spent piling up riches to fill his burial chamber.’ Silence fell over the group. I tried to run away the myths of thousands of years and envision the treasures that once sparkled in the darkness around me. But all I could see was emptiness, bare walls, musty air, and hollow space. All the treasures had long been stolen or decayed. Everything gone. Standing there in the heart of the pyramid, I was struck with how futile life's treasure hunts were. Not just the Pharaoh's, but mine as well. I too was an accumulator of material things, spending so much time and energy

piling up things: a kitchen full of dumb gadgets, closets stuffed with clothes, a den filled with unnecessary computer equipment and fancy electronic devices, a garage crammed with play things, and an attic filled with yesterday's prize objects. My own little pyramid of treasures. Not as splendid as the king's horde, but just as fragile and transient. How much better I thought to spend my time and energy on treasures that would last forever. The eternal treasures that come from giving, caring, forgiving, and ministering. When I climbed out of that pyramid, I had seen more than just one of the seven wonders of the world. I had a silent but convincing lesson on treasures. The kind that make a person rich, and the kind that leave a person poor!"

Because we do not really know what is truly valuable and important in life, we often find ourselves laboring rather pathetically for the trivial things in life, that is, for the food that perishes instead of for the food that endures to eternal life. One person expressed this so well in a poem which goes like this: "Things, things, things. Things that take our precious time. Things that hold us from the life sublime. Things that only gather dust. Things that rot, things that rust. Things that mold, things that creak. Things that harbor foul disease. Things that mock and defy, till at last we grimly die of things, things, things."

St. Paul warns us in the Pauline Epistle Reading today to use our time wisely and to not waste our time on unimportant and trivial things, when he says, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15).

Someone once said, "Man is in love, and he loves what vanishes!" The Bible puts it this way. "For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:16-17).

Nine of the world's most successful financiers recently died as follows: three committed suicide, one was pardoned from prison so that he could die at home, one died abroad insolvent, one became insane, one was released from prison, one died a fugitive from justice, and one died bankrupt living the final years of his life on borrowed money. All of these men had been multi-millionaires. All of them indeed labored for the food that perishes and they perished right along with it! Not only does the food we labor for perish, but we perish along with it if it's not the right kind of food.

Isn't that also exactly what happened to those in the days of Noah, when in the Gospel of Matthew Christ compared the day of His coming to the day the flood came suddenly to destroy all who were outside the Ark, who were busy with the affairs and desires of the world.

Isn't that also exactly what happened in the parable of the rich fool in Luke Chapter 12, who spent his whole life stockpiling and accumulating his goods and possessions. He truly labored for the food that perishes. Isn't it interesting here how the word "fool" is used so often here to describe those who are not watchful or ready and those who do not use their time wisely.

There is all this focus in the world today on nourishing and pleasing the body, and nothing at all is ever mentioned on nourishing and pleasing the soul. And this is precisely why

Isaiah the prophet said, “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:2).

Now what is the food that does not perish? The answer is that it is the food that Christ gives us. The food that Christ says, “the Son of Man will give to you” (John 6:27). That is, the food is Christ Himself! Let us read carefully what Christ says about Himself in Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John (entire chapter). He says, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). And in John 6:48-50, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die” (John 6:48-50). So Christ tells us in these verses that He Himself is the food that does not perish, but endures onto eternal life. And He offers Himself to us in every Divine Liturgy through the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

2. **Our forgetfulness** - The second reason that we are not watchful and not ready to meet Christ is that we forget who we really are and where we came from. We read in Genesis 2:7 that God in fact made us out of the dust of the ground! We read, “And the Lord God made man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

How easily we forget that we are dust! We hide behind the masks of our possessions, our earthly powers and authority, or our intellectual smartness. We forget that we are going to die and we push aside our mortality. Forgetting that we are dust, we imagine ourselves to be more powerful and more capable than we really are. It is precisely this forgetting that we are dust that lies behind the greed, the selfishness, the injustice, the hatred, the anxiety, and the brutality that drives our common life. We also forget what God remembers! God never forgets that we are dust. As we read in Psalm 103:14, “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” And because God remembers our dustiness, He surrounds our dust with His massive “steadfast love” (Psalm 103:11).

3. **Our Spiritual life lacks Purpose, Aim, and Authenticity** -

Another reason for not being ready that we do not have a spiritual focus and a spiritual goal. We wander through life aimlessly and recklessly, wasting our time and going with the flow and being followers of worldly fads and trends.

And our spiritual life lacks authenticity in that we feel that just being around church and spiritual people is enough for our salvation. That is, we try and borrow our spiritual life and relationship with God from others. We learn from the parable of the Virgins that we cannot borrow our relationship with Christ from other people. It must be genuine. We need our own authentic relationship with Christ. When the five foolish virgins tried to borrow oil from the five wise virgins, they could not, for a relationship with Christ cannot be borrowed.

For us to be watchful and ready, we must have a spiritual focus in our life. The following story comes from the early Christian hermits in the deserts of Egypt (the Desert Fathers):

“It seems that a young aspirant to holiness once came to visit the hermitage of an old holy man who was sitting in the doorway of his quarters at sunset. The old man’s dog stretched

out across the threshold as the young spiritual seeker presented his problem to the holy man. ‘Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime of prayer?’ The old man smiled and replied. ‘Let me tell you a story:

One day I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog. Suddenly a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by his barking. What a sight it was, as the pack of dogs ran barking across across the creeks, up stony embankments and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit.

In that story, young man, is the answer to your question, said the old man.’ The young man sat in confused silence. Finally he said, ‘Abba, I don’t understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for holiness?’ ‘You fail to understand,’ answered the old hermit, ‘because you failed to ask the obvious question. Why didn’t the other dogs continue on the chase? And the answer to that question is that they had not seen the rabbit. For you see, unless you see your prey, the chase is just too difficult. You will lack all of the passion and determination necessary to perform all the hard work required to continue the chase!’”

One of the prime prerequisites in our spiritual growth in general is that we must “see the rabbit.” We must have a spiritual goal and focus. We must have a real experience of the Divine Mystery in some form, if we are to keep up the pursuit for holiness and to have focus in our spiritual life. Like the dogs in the hermits story we will drop out of the race if we only follow others - the saints and apostles who have “seen the rabbit”. Each one of us must “see the rabbit,” that is, we must develop a real and authentic relationship with Jesus, not just being followers or not jut by placing ourselves in the company of good people.

4. Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 4:17)

The fourth and final reason for not being ready is that we do not repent for our sins. We do not repent, we cannot change our sinful ways. We will start Jonah’s fast on Monday. The entire theme for this fast is that it is a fast of repentance. In order for us to be watchful and ready, we must repent daily!

According to a legend, God once said to His angels, “I want to play a game of hide-and-seek with humankind. Where you do think I should hide?” One angel suggested the deepest ocean, another the top of the highest mountain. Others the far side of the moon or a distant star. Finally, one angel came up with the answer that God accepted. He said, “Hide in the human heart. That’s the last place they will think of!”

Jesus says in Matthew 4:17, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.” For the kingdom of God to become a reality for us we must first repent. Repentance is Godly sorrow for the sins we have committed. Godly sorrow is not like the worldly sorrow which leads to despair, depression, and even suicide. Godly sorrow leads to repentance, repentance leads

to forgiveness, forgiveness leads to salvation, and salvation establishes the kingdom of God, the rule of God, in our hearts. Where there is no repentance, no Godly sorrow for our sins, the kingdom of God will never come. For we cannot have the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil ruling in the same heart.

Repentance is not merely a negative battling against sin and evil; it is also and primarily a positive progress toward God. Repentance is preparing the human heart for God to enter. For God came to establish residence not in the moon or the stars but in our heart and mind. Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Here is what St. Isaac the Syrian says about the kingdom of God within us: "Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you, and so you will see the things that are in heaven. The ladder that leads to the kingdom is hidden in your soul. Dive into yourself and there within yourself you will find the stairs by which to ascend." The heavenly chamber of which St. Isaac speaks here is another name for the kingdom of God, the presence and rule of God in the human heart.

One way by which the kingdom of God becomes a reality in us is by doing God's will. Jesus told us so in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done!" Jesus is telling us here that the kingdom of God comes when we do His will. Kingdom of God and will of God are tied together. The one does not come without the other. One makes the other possible. "Thy kingdom come!" How? It comes when God's will is done: "Thy will be done."

When Christ comes to rule as King in our heart, He will govern our heart so that we may love only what He loves. He will govern our mind so that no unholy thought be allowed to take root within us. He will govern the books we read, the TV shows we watch, the companionships and the friendships we form, our work and the methods of our business, our money, the way in which we spend our leisure - all will be under the governance of His Kingdom. For He will not be King unless He is King of all!

We often put aside our repentance and confession and tell ourselves, there is always tomorrow. Tomorrow I will read the Bible, tomorrow I will go to church, tomorrow I will repent. Jesus teaches us in this parable of the wise virgins that there comes a point in which it is just too late and too difficult to turn back to God. The foolish virgins just waited too long, "they slumbered and slept", and thus they could not meet the Bridegroom. It becomes more difficult to turn to God when we get older, we get used to a certain way of life and it becomes impossible to change for the better at a certain point in our life, as King Solomon says in Ecclesiastes,

"Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, Before the difficult days come, And the years draw near when you say, I have no pleasure in them" (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

Thus, we must be a continually state of awareness of our spiritual condition by repenting daily. The Desert Fathers of Egypt tell us this great story about St. Sisoie who lay dying when the Lord appeared to him. He pleaded with the Lord, "Give me time to repent, O Christ." When his brethren standing around his sick bed heard this, they said, "You mean you have not repented yet?" And St. Sisoie replied, "Believe me brothers, I have not yet begun to repent." The brethren interpreted this to mean that St. Sisoie had attained the

uttermost perfection and holiness possible on this earth. Because holiness comes through sincere and daily repentance. For it is through repentance and confession that we are cleansed of our sins and made pure and perfect in the eyes of God.

We conclude here with this great quotation from Thomas à Kempis from his classic book “The Imitation of Christ”. à Kempis says,

“For a small income, a long journey is undertaken (that is, one is willing to take a long journey just to gain a small amount of money).

For everlasting life, many will scarce once lift a foot from the ground.

The most pitiful reward is sought after and fought for.

For a single bit of money, sometimes there is shameful contention.

For a vain matter and slight promise, people fear not to toil day and night.

But alas, for an unchangeable good, for an inestimable award, for the highest honor, and glory without end, they grudge even the least fatigue!”

We therefore become ready and watchful by developing an authentic relationship with Christ, repenting daily, reading the Bible, taking Communion, remembering who we are and where we came from, using our time wisely and making the most of our time, and not laboring for the food that perishes, but rather laboring for the food that endures onto eternal life.