

Lesson 16

Proper 27

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:1–13

The parable of the ten virgins warns Christians to be wise and watchful, ready for their Lord's return in glory. Combine it with the parable of the talents, which follows it, and you know clearly that Christian watchfulness is not a matter of lazy waiting, but calls us to faithful use of all Jesus has entrusted to us as we work and wait expectantly for Him.

The story base of the parable is that of a grand Jewish wedding. In Jewish society of that day, it was the betrothal, the formal agreement between two families or two individuals, that was the legally binding action. Though the betrothed continued to live in their separate homes and families for a time—sometimes for as long as a year—they were legally husband and wife. Then, on a scheduled evening, the bridegroom and his friends went in festive procession to the home of the bride to bring her and her maiden companions in procession to the groom's house for the consummation of the marriage with its days of wedding festivities. This story speaks to all Christians (ten is the Bible's number of completeness) as we watch and wait for our heavenly Bridegroom to take us, His Bride, the Church, to the heavenly wedding feast.

244. What is the point around which the parable turns?

245. What is the oil that will ensure that our lamps, our lives, will be burning brightly when Jesus returns as Bridegroom and King?

246. What is suggested by the fact that all ten thought they were ready for the bridegroom, but the foolish ones learned only when it was too late that they were not properly prepared for his coming? (See Matthew 7:21–23.)

247. What is stressed by the fact that the wise virgins could not share their oil with the foolish ones?

248. Where can we get oil for our life-lamps that will have them burning brightly with faith, hope, and love as we wait for our Lord? (See Matthew 11:27–30; 2 Timothy 3:14–17.)

A daily practice of Dr. Horatio Bonar reminds us that we should live with a sense of urgency as we watch and wait. His last act each night before lying down to sleep was to draw aside the curtain and, looking up into the night sky, ask, “Tonight, Lord?” In the morning, his first movement was to look out the window at the dawn and ask, “Today, Lord?”

The Old Testament Lesson: Amos 5:18–24

Amos, whose name means “burden” or “burden bearer,” was God’s prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, 760–750 BC—some thirty years before its fall to Assyria. Amos explained that he was not a professional prophet, but had been a farm worker in the wilderness of Judah when the word of the Lord came to him and he was ordered to go and preach to Israel. Israel was enjoying a time of prosperity, but the prosperity only tended to encourage her religious and moral corruption. Idolatry was practiced alongside the worship of Yahweh at Bethel; there was extravagant indulgence in luxurious living; immorality was rampant; there was frequent corruption of judicial procedures; and oppression of the poor was the order of the day. All the while, the people of Israel and their leaders clung to a false sense of security because of their empty religious rituals. They saw their prosperity as evidence of the Lord’s approval and blessing. Amos called them to repentance and warned that God’s patience with them was at an end.

249. What were the expectations of the people as they waited for the Day of the Lord? How did Amos try to burst their bubble of false expectation?

250. What point did Amos make with the man running from a lion, only to be confronted by a bear, and a man entering a house and leaning against a wall, only to be bitten by a serpent?

251. How could the Lord say “I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies” and “I will not accept [your offerings]” when He was the one who had commanded them to carry out such religious duties?

252. What did the Lord point to as prerequisites for acceptable worship?

253. What is suggested by the rolling waters and the ever-flowing stream in terms of God's people offering Him acceptable worship?

254. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

It is evident in the New Testament that many of the first generation of Christians expected the return of Jesus in glory during their lifetime. In Thessalonica, some even quit working and just spent their days talking about and waiting for Jesus' coming. In time, they became a burden to the other members of the congregation, and Paul dealt frankly with them in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15.

As time passed and Jesus did not return and some of the Christians died, there was concern that those who were not alive to greet the returning Lord would miss out on the promised glory. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to allay these fears and to instruct them in more detail about the hope of eternal life that is shared by all Christians—those living and those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. We who live almost two thousand years after Jesus promised “I will come again and will take you to Myself” (John 14:3) are surely blessed by Paul's words. It is understandable that they have been included in the traditional Order of Burial for Christians.

255. What is implicit in Paul's speaking of the death of Christians as their “falling asleep”?

256. What hope sustains us as Christians and makes our grieving for departed loved ones different from the grieving of “others . . . who have no hope”? What is the solid basis of this hope? (See 1 Corinthians 15:17–23.) What assurance is there for us in Paul's “God will bring with [Jesus] those who have fallen asleep”? (See 2 Corinthians 5:1–10.)

257. Why did Paul emphasize that Christians who are alive at the time of the Lord's coming will have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep?

258. What is the point of the “cry of command, . . . the voice of an archangel, and . . . the sound of the trumpet of God” at the time the Lord will come down from heaven?

259. What is the significance of being caught up in the clouds and meeting the Lord in the air to be with Him forever? (See 1 Corinthians 15:50–57.)

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Lord God, heavenly Father, send forth Your Son to lead home His Bride, the Church, that with all the company of the redeemed we may finally enter into His eternal wedding feast; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:1–13

244. The point around which the parable turns is the contrast between the wise virgins, who brought a supply of oil for their lamps, and the foolish virgins, who just brought their lamps without a thought for the additional oil they might need. Wisdom is shown in being serious about being prepared; folly is shown in carelessness that neglects preparation. This is true in many aspects of life, but it is especially true in the matter of preparing for eternity.

245. All interpreters recognize that the oil is that which makes the difference between true Christians and pseudo-Christians, namely, faith. The words of 2 Timothy 3:5 speak about the form of godliness without its power—a description of those who may be church members, even active and contributing members, but only outwardly, with some other spirit than the Spirit of Jesus motivating them.

246. That all ten thought they were ready suggests that unconverted, unspiritual church members may indeed be foolishly convinced that everything is okay between them and the Lord because they are church members and “believe in Jesus.” But Jesus says that life in the Kingdom involves more than just saying “Lord, Lord”—even by those who are busy church workers.

247. The fact that the wise virgins could share their oil with the foolish ones stresses the principle of individual responsibility. Each generation must relate to Jesus in faith and life for itself—so the Church is always one or two generations away from possible extinction. Only when this is true, however, is the grace of God that leads people to a Spirit-powered, personal relationship with Christ fully significant in making each of us “a wise virgin” with lamp trimmed and fully supplied with oil.

248. A sincere response to Christ in the commitment of discipleship does not happen just through our making up our minds to give it. All of our faith and the Christian life it produces are gracious gifts from God. His Spirit speaks to our hearts through Word and Sacrament. This Word of Christ is “power to make things happen,” power to regenerate sinners, just as His creative Word at the beginning was power to bring all things into existence. Listening eagerly to the Word, as in this Holy Gospel, develops in us a sense of urgency that sees our earthly lives as temporary opportunities under the grace of God to show our love for Him who loved us first by representing Him in word and deed. Christians generally find that the more they get into the Word in personal study, the more they feel the urgency to get deeper into that Word. The more they conscientiously respond to the call

to discipleship, the more they feel the urgency to grow in their readiness to attempt more for Christ and to expect more from Him.

A story is told of a group of students talking about the secret of living lives of deep meaning. A professor suggested, “Live the day before you die for God.” One student asked, “How can we do that? We don’t know the day we will die.” “Then,” the teacher said, “I suppose you will have to live every day for God. It’s as simple as that.”

The Old Testament Lesson: Amos 5:18–24

249. The people of Israel and their leaders, in their self-satisfying prosperity, were proudly anticipating that the Day of the Lord would only confirm them and exalt them as the people of the Lord. They expected that they would share in His glory as the Lord of all the earth. A desire for continued prosperity and for protection from Assyria were probably behind these false hopes and expectations. Amos declared that the Day of the Lord that they would experience would be a day of darkness and not light, “pitch-dark” without a ray of brightness, because of the judgment of the Lord against them for their idolatry and for their disregard of social justice. The fact was that a perfunctory performance of religious ritual being carried out at Bethel would not shield them from the Lord’s wrath.

250. Amos’s descriptions of a man running from a lion only to be confronted by a bear and a man entering the safety of a house only to be bitten by a serpent point to the fact that God’s just judgment against faithlessness and injustice is inescapable.

251. The Lord had commanded the religious rituals as the means by which His grace would be appropriated by His people as they approached Him in faith in His covenant, but He hated the rituals as they were being carried out in perfunctory ways by insincere people. God is not fooled by outward appearance, but judges the thoughts and intents of the heart. (See Psalm 139:1–11; 1 Corinthians 4:5.)

252. The prerequisite for acceptable worship is always a matter of our putting our faith into practice in active love toward others. We fool ourselves if we think we may cheat and hurt others and callously disregard their needs—and cover it up by attending church and going through the motions of our liturgies. God looks for justice and righteousness in our dealings with those around us. Then we will not just ignore circumstances that have become obstacles between us and our Lord when we come in faith and love to worship Him.

253. God looks for justice and righteousness that are continuous and ongoing, not temporary and occasional. Our worship is never to dry up.

254. The Holy Gospel points us to the ultimate Day of the Lord. This lesson reminds us that being ready is not just a matter of sentimental “believing,” but a call for a faith that is expressed in consistent justice and righteousness.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

255. Implicit in speaking of the death of Christians as “falling asleep” is the living hope of eternal life beyond the grave to which all who “sleep in Jesus” will be awakened.

256. The hope that sustains Christians as they grieve for departed loved ones is that their spirits are with Christ and that when Christ comes again, they will be united with their resurrected bodies and be fully equipped for life in the new heaven and new earth. All human societies have some sense of hope that this life is not all there is—and most religions display this hope. Philosophically and theologically, we may see this fact itself as evidence that an awareness of a destiny beyond the grave is built into man’s consciousness, part of the original image of God. Christians do not base their

hope just on some inner feeling, however. The basis of our hope is the fact that the Living Word, who became our Brother in the flesh, died and rose again and lives to rule all things. He promised, “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19). That Paul could say “Through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep” encourages us to believe that while the body that housed a person during his earthly life is lifeless and decaying, his spirit is alive and safely with Jesus, awaiting the resurrection of the body on the day when Christ returns in glory. (See Romans 8:23.)

257. Paul assured the Thessalonians that Christians who die will not miss out on the glory to be revealed in us, thus allaying their fears and concerns. For us today, it still says we don’t have to cling to life desperately, as many do, even beyond real viability, but can look death in the face and even welcome it.

258. The command, the archangel, and the trumpet are apocalyptic images that assert the universality and finality of the *Parousia* of the triumphant Jesus Christ.

259. Clouds were often used in the Bible as the setting for theophanies, so “Christ will come in the clouds of heaven” (see Matthew 24:30) is an understandable description of His return in glory. God is “up”—above us. Being told that we will be caught up to “meet the Lord in the air” assures us that all who are in Christ will joyously receive Him, will be received by Him, and will be fully equipped for the life to come.