

This Means You!

It's a funny thing about warnings—they always seem to apply to the “other guy.” I think of all the warnings that have been on packs of cigarettes since 1965, and those warnings have increased dramatically from, “this may be hazardous to your health” to the present-day, “this will cause lung cancer, birth defects, heart disease, and emphysema.” ***It doesn't matter.*** People still smoke, and people still get all kinds of cancer. *“I knew that there was a risk. I knew all the warnings. I just never thought that it would happen to me. Cancer always happens to someone else, ya know?”* ***Isn't that how it always goes?*** Sickness, bankruptcy, homelessness, divorce, terrorism, abuse...it's never gonna happen to us, is it? That stuff happens all the time, but it happens to ***other*** people. It will never happen to us. I think of all the farmers and carpenters and shop teachers who can only count to “nine” or who truly know the sound of one hand clapping, all because they didn't pay attention to the warning labels and safety guards on the saw. *“I'm not stupid! I don't need anyone to tell me how to do my job”* says the guy with the prosthetic hand. *“You're gonna warn me?! Don't waste your time. I know what I'm doing. Why don't you tell the idiot who needs to hear the warning?”* One trip to the emergency room later.... A couple of pints of blood and a hundred stitches later.... ***It only happens to other people, right?***

The reason I lead with all this is because our Gospel lesson for this morning—the last Sunday in the Church year—is Jesus Christ Himself speaking a stark warning to His Church. **That's us!** *“Warning? Why would Jesus warn us? We don't need the warning! We're the five wise virgins in this story. We're the Church. We're not the problem. It's those unbelieving fools who are the proverbial foolish ones who need the warning! It's those fools who have dozed off into faithless complacency; those who have let the light go out on their faith; those who have forsaken the Church and their faith; they're the ones who need the warning, not us!”* Here we go again.... Warnings are always for the ***other*** guy.

Folks: Jesus speaks these words of warning to His Church—to us—on this last day of the Church year precisely because **we are the ones who need to hear it.** He speaks this warning; this bare-bones Truth to us, not to torture us or cause us unnecessary doubt and despair, but to strengthen us and keep us grounded in the important things. Priorities matter. He speaks this warning—this Truth—to us precisely because He loves us. He loves us, and He doesn't want us to be locked out and forsaken with the rest of the foolish virgins when God's time of mercy and patience comes to an end, and our time for judgment comes due.

And I do want you to take note of how I worded this. We know from Scripture that when we die, our souls immediately go to heaven (or hell). *“Today*

you will be with Me in paradise.”

Judgment Day is when all of creation comes to an end. Judgment Day is when the resurrection of the dead happens. It's when our resurrected bodies are reunited with our souls, either in heaven or in hell. Should we die *before* Judgment Day, we are judged at the moment of death. That's it. Either you go to heaven or you go to hell. This is why I say that **NOW** is the time of God's patience and mercy. **NOW** is the time to repent and turn and cleave to Christ and His all-redeeming sacrifice. **NOW** is the time to flee to Christ and His free and unmerited gifts of grace, mercy, and peace. When this time is up, it's the time of judgment. It's too late then. You don't know when your end will come, do you? You don't know when your time of judgment will be. You have no idea. Contrary to what the world wants you to believe, you're not in charge. God is. You meet your Judge, Maker, and Redeemer when He says its time.

Now, this still doesn't really address why this is a warning for our ears, does it? After all, I'm not worried about meeting my God and Lord in judgment. I'm not worried about dying and leaving this veil of tears behind to be ushered by God's holy angels to a place of honor at His never-ending heavenly wedding feast. I'm a Christian! I have nothing to fear! I am saved through faith alone in God's grace alone, which He bestows upon me unconditionally because of the all-redeeming work and person of Jesus Christ alone. *“Come, Lord Jesus, come!”* I can't wait to get home to heaven!

This is all absolutely true, and I pray that it's your confession too. But...keep in mind that *all* ten virgins in this parable were “Christians.” You see, the term “virgin” comes up throughout Scripture, and it **NEVER** refers to those outside the Church. Those who willfully whore after other gods; those who defile themselves with other gods and self-indulging practices are **NEVER** referred to as “virgins.” God calls them “harlots” or “prostitutes” or “adulteresses,” but never “virgin.”

And yet here Jesus speaks of ten *virgins*. Keep in mind that, contextually, Jesus is speaking this parable to His apostles; guys who were looking around at the mighty temple and all the architecture, and they were getting big heads and big egos. These guys were making big plans and they were getting very confident in their abilities and their status as one of Jesus' inner-circle. They were beginning to believe the hype that when Jesus decided to drop the hammer and crush the Roman occupier along with all the foul and crooked Jewish religious establishment, they were locks for places of honor and prestige and power. Life was going to be very good for them. This is why Jesus spends so much time teaching them about “not one stone left standing upon another,” fleeing for the hills when the abomination of desolation starts to happen, and so forth. This parable is all part of this same conversation; this same warning. *“Not so fast. You clearly don't understand what Church is all about.”*

The fact that Jesus teaches about “ten virgins” lets us know immediately that He’s referring to those who are within the bounds of the Church; ***all ten of them***. They’re all virgins. They’re all invited to the wedding banquet. They all have their lamps. They all wait for the groom. They all fall asleep before the groom arrives. This falling asleep refers to physical death. Basically, they died before Judgment Day. ***Remember: the five wise virgins fell asleep too.*** Falling asleep wasn’t the problem. Falling asleep isn’t what got the five foolish virgins locked out. Until Christ returns in judgment, all men will fall asleep in death, the time for God’s mercy and grace drawing to a close, and the time to stand before the Judge coming due...Christians too.

But...what makes the five wise different from the five foolish? Answer: **The five wise had oil in their lamps, and the five foolish had none.** Okay...that’s easy enough, right? The five wise had the oil of faith, right? The five foolish did not. ***Well...is that necessarily true?*** I want you to think long and hard before you belch out an answer. Are you willing to say that your fellow Christians worshipping with you today are foolish virgins who have **no faith?** You might be so bold as to render such a judgment, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Are you willing to look into the ***mirror*** and admit that you might be one of these fools? ***“What?! How dare you! I have faith! How dare you question my faith!”***

Folks: I’m not questioning anybody’s faith. But...just because you look the part and act the part and speak the part ***doesn’t mean that the appearance is reality.*** Not everyone who goes to Church and punches the clock and calls themselves Christian is a faithful Christian. God sees things differently from men. God sees right through attendance rosters and confirmation certificates and financial giving statements. God sees the heart. God sees the Truth.

So...what is this proverbial oil that separates the wise from the foolish? What is this oil that ushers wise virgins into the wedding feast, while those without this oil are treated no different than pagans and demons? If we look throughout history, our forefathers of the faith identified this proverbial oil with different things. For one, as we’ve already said, this oil is identified with ***faith***. But...we do need to qualify this. ***Faith in what? What kind of faith? All men of faith in something. All men trust in something.*** What did the five wise ones have their faith in? The Groom—Jesus! They fell asleep in **saving faith**. The others did not. Those others may have looked the part and acted the part while they were awake, but when it came down to it; when their time for judgment arrived, they didn’t have the oil of saving faith. When it came down to it, their lights of faith were out. They were in darkness, no different than anyone else who’s outside of faith in Jesus Christ.

Other forefathers of the faith (guys like St. Augustine) identified this oil with “charity.” Now, that may sound like a very ***works-righteous*** interpretation;

something which we would be wise to avoid. After all, charity is something we do, right? Charity is the good stuff we do for other people, right? St. Augustine apparently believed that we needed to be filled up with good works in order to get into the Groom's banquet. **No...that's not what St. Augustine taught or believed.** You see, "charity," as St. Augustine used the word (and as the word was used well up into the 18th century) was another word for "selfless love; a love that gives selflessly and fully, without looking for anything in return." In fact, when you read older translations of 1 Corinthians 13 (aka "the love chapter"), you see that agape/love is translated as "charity." *"If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not charity.... If I give away all I have, and even deliver up my body to be burned, but have not charity.... Charity is patient and kind. Charity does not envy or boast. Charity bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Charity never ends."* Now, we know from this reading that "agape love/charity" refers to Jesus and His unconditional, all-giving, cruciform love. Without Christ and His love/charity, you have nothing. You're a resounding gong; a clanging cymbal. You have no hope.

Now...can a Christian have faith and have no works; no charity? Can you be a faithful Christian, and yet despise the good works that God has prepared for you to walk in and do before the foundation of the world? No! Just like works without faith is nothing, so also ***faith without works is dead, and is no faith at all!*** But...why do faithful Christians do the works of love and charity that they do? Do faithful Christians do good works ***in order to be saved, or out of the joy that they are saved?*** Do they do these works of love and charity in order to get something in return; in order to gain some glory or some praise and accolades? No. That's why Old Adam does these things. ***And that's not true charity, is it?*** If you're doing something in order to get something in return, then by the very definition of the word, **you're not doing charity.** You're doing "for profit" work.

This is Old Adam's wheel house. He likes the glory. He craves the praise of men. He wants the praise and glory of men. This is what those five foolish virgins had filled their lamps with—***the praise and glory of men.*** They weren't filled with selfless charity. They were filled with **profit-seeking greed.** They looked the part of the selfless charitable Christian. They played the part. They said all the right things and did all the right things. They even ***fooled themselves*** into believing that they were good and faithful charitable Christians. But...when the time of God's grace, mercy, and patience had ended; when the time of repentance had ended and had given way to the time of judgment, ***the truth became abundantly clear.*** They were left in the dark. There was no light of Christ in them. There was no oil of God's praise in them. They had filled up on the oil of man's praise, and that oil amounted to nothing. It ran out. It left them in the dark.

“*Oil of God’s praise?*” Yes! Why does God praise His faithful children? What does this look like? What does this sound like? “*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.*” Why does God praise the good and faithful? **Not** because of their works; not because of their own personal brand of charity or righteousness or anything like that. He praises them; He exalts them; He judges them holy and righteous and faithful **solely because they trust in Christ’s perfect righteousness**. They are full of God’s praise because they cleave to Christ alone. They cleave to and trust in God’s righteous and victorious praise that says, “*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.*” And this Son has victoriously declared, “*It is finished, once and for all.*” This Son declares, “*Receive this mark upon your forehead and upon your heart, marking you as one redeemed by Me. I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You bear My name. You belong to Me. You are My child.*” Wise and faithful Christians cleave to and trust in this baptismal promise of God. No matter how **bad or dark or tough** things get in life; no matter how much it may seem like God has fallen asleep at the wheel or forgotten about us, the wise and faithful child of God trusts in the **sure and certain promise** given to them in Holy Baptism.

The wise and faithful child of God also holds fast to and listens to the voice of the beloved Son and Groom as He draws near to us **while we yet patiently tarry in this veil of darkness, night, and tears**. “*Take and eat. Take and drink. Receive this foretaste of the feast to come. This is My body. This is My blood. I am with you always. I am with you now. Take, eat, drink, for the forgiveness of all your sin and for the peace and assurance that surpasses all human understanding.*” The wise and faithful ones listen to this and believe this. The wise and faithful ones recognize that **NOW** is the time to repent and turn and hold fast to the heavenly hand that is reaching down from heaven to feed them, nourish them, embrace them, and love them. The wise and faithful ones are filled with the oil of God’s love and charity as He Himself reaches out and fills them with His Light, His Life, and His Love.

This is why your Lord also warns about the five foolish virgins trying to go out and purchase and procure oil for themselves when the hour had come and they were left locked-out and empty-handed. **They couldn’t do it!** You can’t buy this oil. No one else can give you this oil. This oil of life and light and love; this oil of God’s praise and Christ’s cruciform charity and love comes, only from God! **You don’t buy it. You don’t earn it. You can’t trade for it.** *It’s a gift; a free and unmerited gift* that God desires to give to all who will receive it from Him and His loving hand.

This is also why you don’t hear your Lord teach in this parable **what you need to do** in order to be counted among the wise virgins and avoid being counted among the forsaken foolish. This isn’t about works! This isn’t about what you need to do or not do! It never has been, and it never will be! This is a warning; a

loving, Truthful lesson on what it truly means to be a faithful Christian in this fallen and sinful world. ***Trust in God. Wait patiently in Him. Hold fast to Him and His gifts; His means of grace.*** This is where God repeatedly and continually tops off and even over-fills your lamps with His oil of life and light and love and charity. This is where His oil of praise and peace ***fills your lamps and your souls.***

This parable is a warning; a very loving, fatherly warning from your Maker, your Judge, and your Redeemer; a warning to all those who consider themselves Christians. Do not be deceived. Do not be lured away to the empty praises or profits of men. Do not seek your own glory. Do not think that your good works and deeds will somehow earn you entrance into the heavenly banquet. Do not be deceived into thinking that the oil in your lamp will somehow suffice for your ***foolish loved one's lack.*** You can't believe for them or anyone else. You can only believe for yourself. ***"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...."*** If they don't have oil in their lamp, they will face eternal darkness. They will be locked out and unknown by the Groom. ***You can't cover for them.*** They've been warned. You have too.

The time of God's grace and patience and mercy is **NOW**. The time to repent and believe is **NOW**. Do not get complacent and doze off and let your lamp run dry. You don't know when the Groom will return. You don't know when it's your time to sleep the sleep of death. NOW is the time! The oil of life is God's oil, and only He can give it to you, which He does—***freely***—right here and right now in His Word and His holy Sacraments. ***Hear your bridegroom! Behold your bridegroom!*** He comes to you today! He doesn't leave you alone in the darkness of this world to fend for yourself. Receive the oil He deigns to give you today and every day, in grace and patience and love and charity. Receive in ***humble thanksgiving*** the charity of His grace, mercy, and peace. Receive the charity of His forgiveness, which He poured out for you on His cross, and which He pours out upon you in Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution, and His Holy Gospel. **This "Gospel warning" is for you.** Examine yourself. Look in the mirror of God's Truth. You might look the part. You might say all the right things. **What do you trust in?** Where is your confidence, your hope, your assurance? **Why** are you going to heaven? If the answer isn't ***"because of faith alone in God's grace alone, which He bestows upon me because of Christ's all-redeeming life, death, and resurrection alone,"*** **you've been warned!** Turn and be filled with this oil of life! Turn and bask in the Light, the joy, the praise, and the peace of Almighty God. Turn and be filled and give thanks to Him, your Light, your joy, and the font and source of your never-ending peace.

AMEN