

Can't, Won't, Repentance, and Mercy

I think it's safe to say that most Christians understand the Scriptural reality that when your time on earth is up, *it's up*. When your Lord calls you out of this life, the time for second chances and do-overs has passed. *Either you die as a faithful Christian, or you die outside the faith. That's it.* The same goes for Judgment Day. Should Christ return in all glory and judgment before you die, *that's it. Game over. Time's up.* When your time is up, either you are welcomed into heavenly Paradise, welcomed to the eternal feast table of the Lord (like Lazarus), or you are tossed into darkness (like the anonymous rich man), forsaken and unknown by God; locked out to face the eternal punishment and fiery wrath that was created, not for man, but for the wicked demons who rebelled against God. *These are the two post-mortem/Judgment Day realities for all children descended from Adam.* The text for today makes this crystal-clear. When you are called out of this life, either through death or in Christ's return on the Last Day, you either have oil in your lamp or you don't. Either you enter into eternity as a sheep or a goat. **Those are the only two options**, and there's no time left on the clock to change your answer or make corrections.

And with all this in mind, it makes perfect sense, then, that this text is not only preached in a very typical and predictable manner, *but also received/heard in a very typical and predictable manner.* We get it, right? Jesus isn't exactly teaching a mysterious riddle, is He? We understand the warning about no second chances. You don't want to be found with no oil when the clock runs out. We also understand the great sense of urgency, particularly the *missional urgency*. Don't wait to repent and turn from your sin. Don't wait for a more convenient time to speak the Truth to your friends and loved ones who may be walking outside the faith. **Don't wait, because there may not be another opportunity.** What if we don't make it Christmas or Easter... or even dinnertime tonight? What if the next time that loved one hears the Word of God is at your funeral... or their funeral? It's too late then. Now is the time to repent and be filled with the life-giving, life-saving oil that is the Gospel of Christ. It's daylight. The doors are open now, and the gifts of God are being freely given away now! The same goes for living the faith; *for actually putting the faith into action.* Be walking in the way of the Lord... RIGHT NOW! Don't talk about getting around to it... eventually. So many people treat repentance and a vibrant and active faith/worship life like cleaning out the garage. *"I'll get around to it."* No! Walk the walk of repentant faith NOW, lest things don't go according to *your plans* and you suddenly find yourself walking in darkness with a bunch of goats into eternal punishment. *But like I said: We get it.* We get what is being said here.

But... there's another part of this lesson that is so often missed. The Biblical teaching regarding the last day, whether it's your last day or **THE** Last Day, when Christ returns in all glory and judgment, is not so much that God *doesn't* give people a chance to repent and believe when the clock runs out. Rather, it's more so that the fools and goats *won't* repent and believe. When it was announced that the Bridegroom was finally arriving, rather than fleeing to the Bridegroom, trusting in His mercy and grace, they instead went out on their own, trying to fix their own problems. They could have immediately gone to Him and begged His mercy. They weren't locked out. If they really believed what they said they believed, they would have fled to Him in repentance, confessing their foolishness, and holding fast to His mercy and grace. But they didn't. They didn't even try. It's not that God *refused* them an opportunity to repent. They simply didn't do it. *It's not that they couldn't. They wouldn't. They didn't.*

And the same goes for the goats. Standing before God at the final judgment, they don't plead for His mercy and grace. They don't plead for the blood that makes one worthy of salvation; that salvation; that divine forgiveness and mercy and grace that *no amount of good deeds can ever earn*. They don't plead for God's mercy and grace. They don't confess. They don't repent. Instead, they basically tell God to check His books because He obviously made a mistake. *"You've put us in the wrong group. When did we not do these things?! Look again at all the good we did in our lives! There's obviously been a mistake! I want to appeal. I want to speak to your manager."* Yeah... it's clearly God's fault, isn't it?

And we hear this same thing elsewhere in Scripture. The anonymous rich man cast into hell? He never confesses his sins, *even as he burns in hell*. He doesn't cry out to God to be merciful to him. He cries out to Abraham for mercy. He cries out for mercy based on his bloodlines and genealogy. His cry for mercy has nothing to do with repentance or faith... *at least not faith in the right things*. The same goes for all those on the Last Day who cry out, *"Lord, Lord!"* even as they are cast out into darkness. *"Not all who say 'Lord, Lord' will be saved."* Bear in mind: Your Lord Christ isn't referring to rank pagans and atheists being cast into hell. These are people who *genuinely* thought of themselves as good Christians; certainly better than most. *"Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and cast out demons in Your name and do mighty works in Your name?"* Christ's response to them is the same as it is to the foolish virgins when they find themselves locked out. *"Go away. I don't know you."* Christ doesn't know them because *they never really knew Him*. Again, it's not that God *refuses to* show mercy to them when they repent. Rather, it's that they won't repent. They *don't* repent.

Okay... so what does this have to do with us? For starters, remember that your Lord taught this parable as a *warning*; a very loving warning to all those who

consider themselves to be “good Christians,” to all those who are in danger of trusting in the wrong things and getting complacent in the faith. **This is a “Gospel wake-up call” FOR YOU.** You don’t know when your clock will run out. You don’t know when Christ will say, *“That’s it. Time’s up.”* I would hope that the events of these past several months would’ve made this clear, but—sadly—this doesn’t seem to be the case. And let’s face it: Like the fools and the goats, there are times that we’ve tried to fix our sins ourselves. There are times we’ve failed to confess. There are certainly times that we’ve failed to repent. There are certainly times that we’ve taken issue with God’s assessment of our lives—our words and our deeds—because, let’s face it: we don’t think it’s a sin. *“But Lord, you don’t understand! It’s different in my case. It’s a special circumstance.”* We’re good people, right? We love Jesus, right? We’re good; certainly better than most other people. Along those same lines, there are plenty of times that we do what we want, even when we know it’s a sin in the sight of God; regardless of what God has to say on the matter. After all, we can always repent later. Folks: This is why our Lord teaches us this parable. Is this how you want to leave this world and enter into eternity? Is this okay with you? Repent, and flee to Him. ***Be filled with this oil of life!*** The time of God’s grace and patience and mercy is NOW.

Now, here’s the thing: Our Lord doesn’t *just* teach this parable as a warning. He also teaches this parable to give us comfort, peace, and assurance. Remember: There are also five wise virgins and righteous sheep. The One who desires the death of no man; the One who desires that all would repent and turn and live, tells us everything we **need** to know in order to be saved, right? Faith alone; grace alone; Christ alone. Look to this cross. Here is the truth of your sin. Here is the truth of God’s wrath against all sin. Look and listen to this cruciform Lamb of God, who suffered and died for you, *“It is finished!”* Here is the truth of your forgiveness; the Gospel Truth of the blood-bought righteousness that covers over all your sins.

Examine yourself. What do you trust in? Where is your confidence, your hope, your assurance? Are you going to heaven? If so, ***WHY*** are you going to heaven? Saving faith; the faith of the wise; the faith of the blessed sheep knows the answer: **Christ alone.** Salvation is mine through faith alone in God’s grace alone because of Christ alone. Repentant faith knows the truth of our sin and our salvation. *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the Truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Faith looks to this cross and holds fast to this promise. “It is finished.” The wise in faith flee to and hold fast to Christ, our righteousness in the flesh and in our midst.

My fellow redeemed: Be awake. Be on guard, especially during these dark and uncertain days. Be at peace. The oil of life that grants the wise ones entrance

into the eternal heavenly banquet is God's oil, and only He can give it to you, which He does—*freely and abundantly*—right here and right now in His Word and His holy Sacraments. Look no further than His holy font and His holy table. He comes to you and fills you with all that you need for this body and life and all that you need for the eternal life to come! ***He doesn't leave you alone in the darkness of this world to fend for yourself.*** Even though/as you walk through this shadowy valley of death, He is with you, pouring out upon you the ***undeserved and overflowing charity of His grace, mercy, and peace,*** which He poured out for you on His cross, and which He lavishly pours out upon you in Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution, and His Holy Gospel. May you ever be found fleeing to, holding fast to and rejoicing in the eternal and unconditional peace that is known and given only in these gifts of Christ, and may this same Christ-centered peace, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him, now and till the clock runs out and into all eternity.

AMEN.