

## 1 Last Sunday – Matthew 25

Jesus tells us to stay awake, because we don't know the day or the hour. He says this after his parable of ten virgins who all fell asleep. Even the wise virgins fell asleep. Everyone gets tired. Everyone dozes off. This means that his warning applies to all of us. This is why we always need oil. We always need the Holy Spirit. We always need the Word of God. No matter how much we think we already know it, no matter how much we have committed to memory, we all need to hear the warning cry from our Lord. Some might say, "We don't need to repent." Others might say, "We've already repented." But our Lord says to all people everywhere, "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is here." Stay awake. Be always aware of your need for God's Word. Because no matter how much you think you know, you don't know the hour or day of Christ's return.

Everyone falls asleep. Even the most diligent student of the Bible gets distracted, bored, and sleepy. Those who learn by heart the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Bible passages about Baptism, the Office of the Keys, and the Lord's Supper – even these people doze off. We can memorize the whole Bible and learn every hymn in the hymnal. But we still need to hear the Word of our Savior. We were first anointed by the Holy Spirit in our baptism, and we need him continually to give his healing and forgiving oil to treat our sin infested wounds with the mercy of Christ.

Memorizing Bible passages is wonderful practice. This past week our Sunday School teachers got together to assign memory work for the children of this congregation to learn and recite during the Christmas Eve service. The fact that we still have a culture of memorizing Scripture and hymns in our congregation is something for which we should thank God. Whether it is in the home, in Sunday School, Wednesday School, or simply from regularly attending the divine service on Sundays, there is no greater treasure we can give our children than to help them commit Bible passages, the Catechism, and Christ-centered hymns to memory. It is especially crucial in our day when memorization is neglected so much. More and more people assume that children can't memorize anything. We should recognize how blessed we are to have this practice. We should also not lose sight of how beneficial it is to follow a common order of service. With hardly any effort at all, you and your children memorize God's Word simply by singing and reciting it every week in the liturgy. I can't say enough about how valuable this is, whether it is when I hear a little child singing along to the words of Christ in the Sacrament, or when I hear a parishioner with dementia who can't even remember anyone's name yet can recite the Creed and the liturgy by heart.

But still, even for those of us who think we have memorized a lot of Scripture and hymns, we need to hear our Lord's words. We need his words all the time. We need his warning and his promise. Stay awake. Don't assume that just because you've learned the basic teachings of the faith you therefore don't need to keep learning. Faith does not come by already knowing the Word of Christ. No, Faith come from hearing the Word of Christ. This never changes as long as we live in this dying world and in our dying flesh.

The Kingdom of heaven is like ten virgins who go out to meet the bridegroom. They are called virgins to show that they are all outward members of the church. They are outwardly pure. But five of them are wise and five are foolish. When Jesus calls them wise, he isn't necessarily saying that they are smart. He is saying that they are mindful about what they need. They are

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prudent. They know they need oil for their lamps. So instead of relying simply on the oil already in their lamps, they bring along extra oil. Instead of relying simply on the passages of Scripture they have already memorized, they continue to pay attention to the Word of God as it is taught out of the Scriptures.

In the same way, the foolish virgins are not necessarily unintelligent. They have managed to learn some Scripture. They have some oil in their lamps. They did their memory work and passed the exams. They've learned about Jesus, that he is true God and true Man, who died for our sins and was raised on the third day. They might even be able to win an argument with someone about what the Bible says on baptism, faith, or good works. But they are foolish. They're unthoughtful. They don't pay attention to the continual teachings, warnings, corrections, and comforts of Scripture. They keep their outward company with the other virgins, boasting in how much they already know, all the while not paying attention to their continual need for this saving truth.

The foolish virgins trust in the oil that's already in their lamps. Foolish Christians trust in their own faith. They do this instead of trusting in the source of their faith, which is the Word of God. And those who trust in their faith do not take seriously the warning of Christ. They do not take seriously the warning against the devil who walks around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. They figure that they have the strength to resist temptation. They figure that they already have the right understanding of God's mercy and justice. So they shut their ears to God's Word, little by little, until they replace what God says with what they think.

And why is this? Why do folks stop listening to God's Word? It's because they would rather hear themselves talk. They would rather affirm themselves in what they already believe. And they might even be able to make it sound Christian. They might be able to answer correctly a lot of Bible trivia. But they don't want to depend on what the Bible says. They don't want to deny themselves. They don't want to die to themselves. They might be able to quote the Bible. But they don't want to suffer for it, confess it in the face of hostility, and depend on it in their dark and sleepy hours.

The wise virgins know that they still need the oil, and the proof that they need it is that they, like the foolish virgins, fall asleep. They also doze off. They get worn out by all the distractions of this world, which values everything under the sun more than God's Word. And yet, despite the weakness of their flesh, they are saved through faith. Because their faith is continually fed by the words of their crucified and risen Savior.

The only difference between the wise and foolish is that the wise brought oil with them while the foolish did not. Some Christians fall away and others don't. The only difference is faith. And this faith is not just our own cultural values. It isn't some nostalgic feeling or old fashioned opinion. It is a dying to this world and living to God in Christ. Faith is not simply an outward adherence to the pure doctrine of the Scriptures. It is a deep conviction and certainty of the salvation revealed in this doctrine. Faith is not the work of flesh and blood. It is the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit who alone convicts and comforts our hearts with the righteousness of Christ who died for us.

### 3 Last Sunday – Matthew 25

When Jesus tells us to stay awake, he is teaching us to live in his light. As Paul says, we are not children of the night or the darkness. We don't need to sneak around while pretending to be good and pure Christians. No, we can be honest about the fact that we fall short. We can acknowledge that we have a lot to learn. We can be truthful about our need for God's grace every moment of our lives. And this is because we are children of the day. The light of Christ shines upon us. And we don't need to be afraid to walk into this light. We don't need to be ashamed that our lamps often run dry, that our lights grow dim, and that we need more oil. Because we know that our Lord does not shine his light on us to condemn us. The sins he exposes in us he does not count against us. He already knows them. He bore them in his own body.

So be honest about your weakness. Don't pretend that you already know everything. Don't imagine that you could never doze off and fall asleep. Be sober and honest about the dangers of this present darkness. Put on the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of faith. And be confident that God did not appoint you to be punished by his anger but to be saved by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that, awake or asleep, we may live with Him. So even as you already have been memorizing Scripture, encourage and strengthen one another just as you are doing. Let us pray:

O Father, when we wake and sleep  
Our faith in Your Salvation keep.  
For we cannot by human pow'r  
Resist the devil's tempting hour.  
Lord, may Your Wisdom for us fight  
And keep us children of the light.

Lord Christ, defend Your Christendom  
From all that You have overcome  
By Your own piercéd hands and feet.  
Though now in mourning may we meet  
With joy, our Bridegroom; You will come  
To take Your congregation home.

O Comforter, when sins annoy  
And fierce temptations would destroy  
The flame of faith, so pure and true,  
By Your own Word of grace renew.  
Within our hearts for oil make room  
To watch for Christ, the heav'nly Groom. Amen.