WORD AND SACRAMENT

Where the Oil Is Given

Ten Lamps and a Long Night

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Ten Lamps and a Long Night

The parable of the ten virgins makes people uncomfortable, and it should. Ten young women go out with their lamps to meet the bridegroom. Five are wise and five are foolish. The bridegroom is late, everyone falls asleep, and at midnight the cry goes up. Five go in to the feast, and the door is shut on the other five.

Someone recently asked a fair question about this story: what is the problem being presented here? Is it the oil, or is it something else?

It is the oil. But everything depends on what the oil is and where it comes from. The foolish virgins did not fail because they tried too little. They failed because they ran dry and did not know where oil is given. That is a question about faith, and about the place where Christ has promised to give it. It is, in the end, a question about Sunday morning.

Lamps Going Out

Start with who these women are. They are not pagans standing outside the church. All ten are in the bridal party. All ten have lamps. All ten are waiting for the same bridegroom. This is a parable about the visible church, about people who are counted as insiders.

Notice also what the ten have in common. "When the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep" (Matthew 25:5). The wise slept too. Sleeping is not the failure. Nobody in this story stays awake through the whole night by strength of will.

The difference shows up when they wake. The foolish say, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out" (v. 8). Going out, not empty from the start. Their lamps had been lit. They took no flasks along (v. 3), so what was in the lamp was all they had, and it was enough for a short wait. It was not enough for a long one.

That is the shape of the danger. The foolish were not people who never had faith. They were people who had something once and assumed it would last. Jesus describes the same thing in the parable of the sower: the seed on rocky ground is received with joy, "but since he has no root, he remains for only a season" (Matthew 13:21). The night is longer than they planned for, and the bridegroom does not come on their schedule.

Oil That Cannot Be Borrowed

The wise virgins can sound selfish at first. Their friends are in trouble, and they refuse to share. "No," they say, "or there may not be enough for both us and you" (v. 9).

But the wise are not being stingy. They are telling the truth about the oil. Luther, preaching on this parable, read the lamps as the outward profession of the Christian life and the oil as faith in the heart. On that reading the refusal is simply how faith works. No one can believe on someone else's behalf.

Your mother's faith cannot fill your lamp. Neither can your pastor's, your spouse's, or the faith of the congregation you grew up in. A family name on the church roll does not keep a lamp burning. Neither does a confirmation certificate in a drawer, or the memory of a season when you were zealous. Each person stands before the Bridegroom with his own lamp.

This is not a call to look inward and measure how much oil you have left. Faith that stares at itself only finds reasons to despair. The point is narrower and more practical: since no one can lend you oil, you need to know where oil is actually given.

Oil That Cannot Be Bought

The wise tell the foolish, "go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves" (v. 9). So off they go at midnight, looking for a dealer. "But while they were on their way to buy it, the bridegroom arrived. Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut" (v. 10).

There is something fitting about where the foolish end up. When they finally realize they are running dry, their instinct is to go and get faith on their own, by their own effort, at the last minute. It is the instinct of every religion of the heart: make a decision, work up a feeling, strike a bargain, find the right method, and do it fast because time is short.

But the Lord does not sell His oil. He gives it away. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you without money, come, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55:1). The only buying in God's kingdom is the kind done without money. The price was paid by Someone else, and what He bought He hands out freely.

The tragedy of the foolish virgins is not that oil was unavailable. It was available all along, free, in the place where the Bridegroom had promised to give it. They simply were not there when it was being given, and when they needed it they went looking somewhere else.

Where Christ Promised to Give It

If faith cannot be borrowed and cannot be bought, where does it come from? Scripture answers plainly: "Consequently, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Faith does not rise up from inside us. It comes to us from outside, through a Word spoken into our ears.

The Augsburg Confession puts it this way in Article V. To obtain this faith, God instituted the office of preaching and gave the Gospel and the Sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith where and when He wills in those who hear the Gospel. The oil has an address. The Spirit has bound Himself to His Word and to the Sacraments that Word establishes.

This is what Lutherans mean by the means of grace. God could have chosen to work in some other way, but He has told us where He has chosen to work: in the preached Word, in Baptism, in Holy Absolution, and in the Supper of His body and blood. These are not reminders of grace or symbols of a grace received somewhere else. They are the very places where Christ gives forgiveness, life, and salvation, and with them the faith that receives those gifts.

So the question "Where do I get oil?" has a concrete answer. Not in a feeling, not in a decision, not in a private spiritual practice I invent for myself. Oil is given where Christ said He would give it. And the ordinary place where all of those means come together for the people of God is the Divine Service.

Lamps Filled Week After Week

The old German word for worship is *Gottesdienst*, God's service. The name gets the direction right. Before the Divine Service is anything we do for God, it is what God does for us. He is the one serving. We are the ones being filled.

Walk through the service with the parable in mind, and you can see the oil being poured.

It begins with confession and absolution. We admit what is true: our lamps are low, and we have not kept watch as we should. Then the pastor speaks forgiveness in the name of Christ, by His command. "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven" (John 20:23). That is not a pious wish. It is the Bridegroom's own voice through the mouth He has sent.

Then comes the Word: the readings, the Psalm, and the sermon. This is where faith comes by hearing. Christ promised, "Whoever listens to you listens to Me" (Luke 10:16). When His Word is read and preached, the Spirit is at work, kindling faith where it was dim and strengthening it where it was weak.

Then comes the Supper. Here the Bridegroom gives His own body and blood into the mouths of His guests. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). *Until He comes.* The Supper is the meal of people waiting for the Bridegroom, a foretaste of the wedding banquet the wise virgins enter. Those who come to His table now are being made ready for His table then.

None of this is a one-time filling. A lamp burns oil, and the night has been long. That is why the church gathers every Lord's Day, and why the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). The Bridegroom does not fill a lamp once and leave it to last for decades. He fills it again and again, as often as His people come to be filled.

Wandering from Where the Oil Is

This is why the parable speaks so directly to a common way of thinking in our day. “I don’t need to go to church to be a Christian.” “I can worship God out in the woods.” “My faith is between me and God.”

There is a sliver of truth in each of these. God is everywhere, and a Christian can pray anywhere. But God has not promised to give His oil anywhere and everywhere. He has promised to give it in His Word and Sacraments. A man may admire the sunrise from a deer stand and thank God for it, and he should. But the sunrise does not absolve him. The woods do not preach Christ crucified for his sins. No creek ever gave anyone the body and blood of the Lord.

The person who drifts from the Divine Service usually does not abandon the faith in a single decision. It happens the way the foolish virgins’ lamps went out: slowly, unnoticed, over a long night. A missed Sunday becomes a habit. The habit becomes a life. And the lamp that once burned brightly flickers lower each week, because it is no longer being filled.

The writer to the Hebrews saw this coming. “Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have made a habit, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). The reason he gives is the same as the parable’s: the Day is approaching. The Bridegroom is coming. And the time to be where the oil is given is now, not at midnight when the cry goes up.

This is not a word of law laid on people who are already crushed. For the one who has wandered, it is an invitation. The door is not yet shut. The oil is still free, and it is still being poured out every Lord’s Day in the place Christ promised. Come back to where the oil is given.

The Bridegroom Who Knows His Own

The parable ends with the hardest words in it. The foolish virgins come back and pound on the door: “Lord, lord, open the door for us!” And the bridegroom answers, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you” (vv. 11-12).

Those words echo the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where those who say “Lord, Lord” hear, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23). The final question is not how much oil you managed to store up. It is whether the Bridegroom knows you.

And here the parable turns from warning to comfort. How does the Bridegroom come to know His people? He calls them by name in Baptism. He speaks His absolution into their ears. He feeds them at His table. “I am the good shepherd. I know My sheep and My sheep know Me” (John 10:14). The ones He knows are the ones He has been feeding all along.

So do not measure your lamp in the dark, wondering whether you have enough. Go where the oil is given. Hear the Word. Receive the absolution. Come to the Supper. Do it next Sunday and the Sunday after that, for as long as the night lasts.

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (v. 13). For the Christian, keeping watch does not mean staying awake by sheer effort. Even the wise slept. It means staying near the Bridegroom's gifts, so that when the cry goes up at midnight, the lamp He has kept filled is still burning, and the door opens to the feast.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), dedicated to the public domain. Identified translation and textual-variant comparisons retain the readings discussed.