

A Lamp That Will Never Go Out

Matthew 25:1-13

Halifax: 14 January 2007

Introduction:

Ivan was a seven year old boy who lived in Russia.

- Until last year, Ivan had been a very ordinary boy.
- He lived with his mother and father in a farm house and when he wasn't at school or helping his dad with the chores, he often entertained himself in the woods around the farm.
 - But last year, tragedy had struck.
 - While he was at school, something had gone wrong with the furnace in Ivan's house and his mother and father both died in the fire.

The Russian officials had come and taken Ivan off to an orphanage.

- It was a very dreadful place.
 - The woman who ran the orphanage did not like children and she was very severe with them.
 - The children were often beaten for no particular reason, and they were frequently cold and hungry and tired.
- But one of the children who lived there had discovered a letter when he was cleaning her office.
 - It was from a wealthy man from France who said that he had made arrangements with the authorities to visit the orphanage and adopt some of the children...
 - He was willing to adopt them all, but first, he wanted them to learn French!
 - When he came, he would speak to the children in French to test them,
 - and all those who could understand him would be taken to families that were waiting to adopt them.
- Some of the children mocked and said it could not be true...
 - But there was a group of children who believed and they often got together to study French and to encourage each other.
 - Ivan found them to be a very warm and friendly group and really enjoyed their company.
 - He went to the French lessons so he could be with the others,
 - he was not really so sure about the coming of the French man—so he didn't spend much time meditating on his lessons and reviewing them.
 - But he truly enjoyed the company of the little group.

- But one day there was great excitement in the orphanage...
 - All the children were summoned to come and present themselves to the Frenchman.
 - The man began to speak, but Ivan couldn't understand what he said.
 - He tried to ask his friends, but they told him to be quiet so they could hear what the man said.
 - It was too late now.
 - Ivan watched with great sadness as the happy children who had learned French drove away in the bus.
 - Ivan was left with the other children who had not prepared themselves.
 - The Matron of the house was angrier than ever—
 - Funding for the orphanage would be reduced...
 - Conditions would be worse than ever.

This story illustrates that I have told illustrates the very same thing as the parable Jesus told about the wise and foolish virgins that we read a moment ago in Matthew 25.

- In Jesus' story, the virgins did not know when the bridegroom was going to come.
 - In those days it was customary for the bride and bridegroom to be taken by a grand procession to the home that he had prepared for he and his wife.
 - It was the duty of virgin bridesmaids to join the procession with lamps to light the way.
 - These lamps were usually torches with rags or rope wrapped around that were saturated with oil to make them burn.
 - But in Jesus parable, some of them did something very absurd...
 - They brought their torches, but they did not bring any oil with them!
 - Obviously, their torches would not burn very well or very long without oil!
- Now I want you to understand that for a virgin who was serving in this way to bring no oil for her lamp is something very absurd—
 - It is almost unbelievable to think that five of the ten would do this!
 - It is as ridiculous as the man in the parable Jesus told at the end of the Sermon on the Mount who built his house on the sand so that it would not be able to withstand the ordinary rainy season that came each year.

- It would be like someone building a house in Nova Scotia that was not designed to handle a snow load on the roof.
 - It's something no reasonable, sensible person would ever do.
- In the same way, who would ever go to provide light for a procession without taking oil to feed their lamp?
 - I suppose you could imagine one person doing that as an oversight,
 - but in this story, a full half of the company have no fuel for their lamps!
- This is supposed to be absurd because it illustrates what is even more absurd...
 - It illustrates those many thousands and millions and hundred millions who join themselves to the church of Jesus Christ,
 - which is the society whose sole purpose it to reconcile sinful men with God...
 - It is to join that society without ever bothering to themselves be reconciled.
 - Absurd beyond imagination!
- And so we may say that in this parable,
 - Jesus is setting up a contrast between the wise and the foolish members of visible church—
 - He knew that throughout the ages of the church, there would be many both wise and foolish members...
 - And He gives this contrast so that all His chosen ones might hear and not live in this terrible deception...
 - It is my prayer that all of you who hear my voice will give earnest attention that you might make certain that you are not so foolish as the five virgins who took no oil in their lamps.
 - For the sake of your precious soul,
 - consider with me two great contrasts between the wise and the foolish church member.

I. First, what do the wise and foolish church member each have?

- I will begin with the foolish...

A. The foolish church member has just enough grace to live in the visible church.

1. They are content with enough grace to satisfy the leaders of the church and the other members that they are qualified to be members in good standing.
 - a. They watch the other members to see what kind of outward behaviour is expected of them, and they comply.
 - Their eyes are not on the Lord, but on the other members.
 - They want to be a part, so (to borrow from Jesus' parable) they get their wedding clothes and their torches and they assemble with the others.
 - They learn the right things to say, pick up all the language of the church, and learn to make a very fair show.
 - When they apply for membership,
 - they satisfy whatever body in the church is responsible for admitting them...
 - and then they maintain the conduct that is expected of them if they wish to continue in the fellowship of the church.
 - b. Now of course there are many churches that have entirely deviated from what constitutes a good profession or the Christian faith...
 - 1) These churches accept members and even ministers that do not believe the Bible to be the infallible word of God and the only rule of what is to be believed and practiced...
 - They accept members who do not confess that they are sinners who fully deserve to go to Hell apart from the saving mercy of Christ...
 - They accept members who live openly immoral lives or who refuse to reconcile with their brothers and sisters—or even their own spouses!
 - Foolish church members are often drawn to such churches because it is easy to find acceptance when they are without the true grace of God...
 - 2) But there are also foolish members in churches that are faithful and require a good profession from all their members.
 - And these foolish members learn to live in such a way that they find acceptance in these bodies as well.
 - They are like Judas who lived in the very company of Jesus and the other disciples for three years,
 - or like Demas who served in the ministry with Paul and then departed because of an inordinate love for the world.
 - We use them as examples because they visibly departed and showed their true colours...

- But there are many foolish members who never depart in this world...
 - They live their whole life in the good standing and fellowship of the church and their hypocrisy is never known to the church...
 - They will not be discovered by us until the day of judgement...
 - Some of them are elders, some of them are ministers, some of them are known as prayer warriors or as very faithful servants...
 - They are like the virgins whose folly was not known until the bridegroom came.

- 3) The Bible has some surprising things to say about the grace that such persons have received—
 - It is not saving grace, but it is grace that enables them to be members in good standing in the visible church.

 - For example,
 - In 2 Peter, we are told that there are some hypocrites who can be said to have:
 - “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 2:20)
 - In Hebrews 6, an even fuller description is given of the temporary grace that a hypocrite may obtain...
 - They are called “those who were once enlightened”—
 - in other words, they understood and explained the truth...
 - They are called those who “have tasted of the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit”—
 - in other words, they were actually given spiritual gifts to minister to the other members of the body...
 - They are called those who “have tasted of the good word of God and of the powers of the age to come.”
 - in other words, they have been a part of the body of Christ and have experienced the influence of God’s gracious working upon the whole—
 - they have seen answered prayers and been the recipient of answered prayer.
 - they have enjoyed the general atmosphere of hope and have had a measure of comfort from the hope of body as a whole.

TRANS> These foolish church members have just enough grace to live in the fellowship of God's people...

2. But they do not have enough grace to live in real fellowship with God.
 - a. They do not have a personal relationship with God.
 - They have never truly been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and renewed by His Spirit.
 - They have, in fact, never **really** sought after that...
 - To them, all the talk about sin and about God is not quite real.
 - They are interested in having the appearance that they are reconciled, but they have never really transacted business with God.
 - They have prayed words and asked God to forgive them with empty words, but they have never really spoken to Him as one who believes in Him...
 - They have said thank you to Him for sending Jesus, but they have never really been thankful for it or really looked to Jesus in faith.
 - They have changed their conduct in many ways, but they have never really changed with a view to pleasing God.
 - b. Now brothers and sisters,
 - I hope that you can all be honest enough to admit that you know exactly what I am talking about!
 - You all know that there are times when you have prayed for forgiveness, either in private or in public, and not really meant it.
 - Or when you have repented with your feet, but your heart remained as attached as ever to your sin.
 - There is not a one of you that can say you have never done such things...
 - But the foolish church members are the ones who are characterised by this kind of behaviour.
 - They draw near to God with their lips, but their heart is far away.
 - They have a form of godliness, but deny the power.
 - They really don't know what it is to live unto God—to respond to Him and to His Word!
 - They know what it is to respond to the church, but they do not know what it is to deal with the Lord Himself.

- We have all known persons that have lived in the good fellowship of the church and have suddenly proven themselves to be the sons of Belial...
 - They have fallen away and have never returned... just as Jesus described in the parable of the sower...
 - But you must be mindful of the fact that there are also many others who are not exposed until the last day...
 - as in the parable of the wheat and the tares—they look the same until the last day when they will be separated at the coming of our Lord Jesus and appointed to the place of hypocrites.
- c. What makes this foolish member such a fool is the fact that He is a part of a society which society's purpose is reconciliation with God...
 - But this member has never bothered to be reconciled!
 - He has not believed that He is truly condemned and undone by his sin, nor has he ever honestly turned to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and for the gift of God's Spirit.
 - He joins the society whose purpose it is to live in communion with God does not care to have anything truly to do with God!

TRANS> And so we may say that the foolish church member has enough grace to live in the visible church for a time—even till death in many cases—but he does not have enough grace to live unto the Lord.

- Now let's look at the wise church member.

B. What does the wise church member have, as represented by the wise virgins?

1. Just like the foolish church member, the wise church member has a credible profession of faith in the visible church.
 - a. In fact, there is no real difference in their appearance.
 - They have their sins and their struggles and their weaknesses and their trials.
 - Their lives are noticeably different from those outside the church,
 - but they are not outwardly different from the foolish church members who worship beside them.
 - They make the same confession and pray the same prayers and eat the same bread and drink from the same cup and profess the same gospel.
 - b. There are even times when they may fall away and have to put out of the church for refusal to repent...
 - however, in their case, the discipline will do them good and bring about their restoration...

- they will recover and be reconciled by the grace of God.
- But this can happen in a visible way to the foolish member...
 - He can be removed and then restored upon outward repentance.

TRANS> So as far as the wise member's outward profession, there is no perceptible difference between him and the foolish member.

2. But there is a **huge** difference in the wise member's relationship with God...

- The wise member actually has what he professes to have...
 - a. He truly believes that he is undone by sin and that Jesus Christ is the only way that he can be forgiven.
 - And he truly is resting in Jesus Christ for the remission of his sin and so has his sins forgiven.
 - And through faith in Christ, he has received the promise of the Holy Spirit who vitally connects him to the LORD.
 - His obedience and confession is not merely in response to other men, it is a response to the living God.
 - He has a heart that truly wants to please God and that delights in God's law from within.
 - He does not look at the law as a grievous bondage,
 - but as God's counsel and wisdom that he desires to fill every nook and cranny of his life.
 - To him, obedience from the heart is just as important as outward obedience.
 - He struggles with his flesh and with his old ways,
 - but that is what makes him different...
 - He is struggling with these things because he truly wants to please His Lord.
 - He cannot live at peace with His sin—both sin that is visible to others as well as sin that is not visible to others.
 - b. The abiding that Jesus talks about in John 15 is a reality for him...
 - He is a branch that abides in Jesus the vine...
 - That is, by faith he is connected to Jesus by faith in such a way that he is actually receiving life from Jesus... the sap is flowing from Jesus to him.

- This sap is the Holy Spirit whom Christ gives to all His own.
- It is the oil that read about in Zechariah that flows from the anointed priest and king to the lamp to keep it burning!
- This oil surely refers to the Holy Spirit who is often represented by oil.
 - In Zechariah, the Lord says with reference to the supply of oil, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit!”
 - It is this oil that causes the true believer’s lamp to keep burning.
 - The believer has within him the fuel of spiritual life, the Holy Spirit of God whom Jesus gives to all who believe.
- This is what makes the wise member so different!
 - He has the new life that is promised in the gospel so that he truly is reconciled to God.
 - He is truly washed in the blood of the Lamb and truly believes God’s Word.
 - He lives a life unto God wrought by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit at work in him.

TRANS> And so you see that although the appearance of the wise and foolish church member is the same—

- (both go out to meet the Bridegroom with their torches)
 - They are in fact entirely different because the one has the new life that comes from Christ and the other does not have life, but abides in death.
- Now we need to consider the second question:

II. What will be the outcome for the wise church member and the foolish church member when our Lord returns?

- A. When the coming of the bridegroom is first announced, they appear to be much the same...
1. They have both dressed themselves, they have both gone out to wait for the Bridegroom,
 - but most of all, they both hear the cry that He has come!
 - a. Now I want you to consider that **everyone**—
 - not only the wise and foolish church member, but absolutely **everyone** will hear this cry...

- not only those who are alive when He returns, but also those who are in the graves.
- b. When Jesus declared that all judgement had been given to Him, He added:
- John 5:28-29: Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.
 - There will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust...
 - All will be called forth to stand before God.
- c. And in this great company, there will be three sorts of persons...
- Those who were never a part of even the visible professing church of Jesus Christ... Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Jews and atheists and agnostics will all be there...
 - And then there will be the two sorts of persons who were members of the visible church...
 - the foolish and the wise.

TRANS> And these foolish and wise church members will look quite a lot the same at first...

- They had clothed themselves with a Christian profession and are gathered with their lamps to meet the Bridegroom...
2. And they will, according to our parable...
- a. both awaken when the cry comes and start to trim their lamps...
- 1) Their LORD's coming will be a surprise to them both...
 - The wise will not be gathered out in a special assembly with secret knowledge regarding his return...
 - They will be found with the foolish slumbering and sleeping.
 - 2) This is a very good picture of the surprise that will be common to all!
 - We are all at least half asleep with respect to our Lord's return...
 - We are asleep in that we are caught up with our cares and concerns in this world, often indifferent to His return...
 - We are asleep in that we go on with our personal quarrels and our lusts continue to plague us.
 - We have our church divisions and our distractions...

- We really don't any of us live constantly as if our Lord is really going to come.
- This is not to say that sleeping is itself wrong,
 - but in the symbolism of the parable, it certainly points the fact that they were none of them so alert that they did not have to be awakened.

TRANS> So both the wise and foolish will be surprised that He has come, though the wise truly expected Him, they will be surprised that He has come now...

b. And both will begin to trim their lamps...

- Trimming a lamp means that you set it in order, you get it ready for use.
- And it is at this time that the great difference between the wise and the foolish will appear!

B. The foolish will be in great distress!

1. They will suddenly realise their fatal deficiency!

- All along they were perfectly content to live with an outward profession of faith that satisfied their fellow churchmen...
 - But when the glory of Christ appears this profession will prove to be wholly inadequate!
 - They will become frantic when they realise that they do not have the oil of the Holy Spirit to make their lights shine!
 - They will realise that they have lived all these years in the church without ever bothering to transact business with God!
 - They have played the song but they have not lived the song...
 - They have drawn near with their lips but their hearts have been far away.

2. They will see their companions in the church who truly believe...

- They will see the oil that they have and they will ask for it for themselves...
 - "Give me some of your oil!"
- But their friends will tell them that must have their own oil...
 - The Spirit and the grace of God are not transferable from one believer to another.
 - They are found only in Christ.
- These foolish ones will, for the first time, be looking for grace...

- but they will be looking for grace when the day of judgement has come!
- They had all those years in the church when they might have attended to the word of God and the Sacraments...
 - When they might have believed the gospel and might have received the grace of God through faith.
 - When they might have been renewed in the inner man by the Spirit of God...
 - But instead they were idle when the word of God was read and preached, and even when they read it themselves...
 - They will realise that until now, they have never really prayed.
- 3. They will try to find grace now, but it will be too late...
 - The door will be shut because it is no longer the day of grace...
 - The day of judgement has now come!
 - Their hearts will sink under that helpless feeling that they were so close to the fountain of grace and never drank from it...
 - They will know in ways that are beyond our comprehension the sorrow of opportunity lost!
 - It will be forever too late...
 - What unspeakable anguish will be theirs!

C. But oh how marvellously different it will be for the wise!

1. They will light their lamps and their lamps will shine, fuelled by the oil of the Spirit of God!
 - a. They will be found clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, washed in the blood of His atonement...
 - Through Him, they will be without spot and blameless...
 - Every blemish on their record will be blotted out and they will know it when they see the glory of Him who died for them and in whom their souls had trusted.
 - b. The Holy Spirit who has been at work in them all along will bring to completion His great work in them!
 - Their profession and their assurance and their holiness will all be perfected in that day...
 - Their bodies will be raised up and made immortal—death and infirmity will be swallowed up.

2. All of their hopes and all their longings will be at once fulfilled!
 - They will be swept up into the company of the one their soul has loved.
 - a. They will be brought into His house and the door will be shut behind them...
 - It will be forever shut to close out all that they have left behind—
 - their sorrows, their trials, their sins, their uncertainties, their confusions, their persecutions, their temptations—
 - It will all be left behind...
 - b. But best of all, as J.C. Ryle comments:
 - “They shall be with their Lord:
 - with Him who loved them and gave Himself for them;
 - with Him who bore with them, carried them through their earthly pilgrimage:
 - with Him whom they loved and truly followed faithfully on earth, though with much weakness, and many a tear.”
 - They will be, as Paul says to the Thessalonians, **forever** with the Lord.
 - And they will find His company to be better than they ever dreamed!
 - Their spirits will soar with the prospect of living in His glorious presence forever!
 - It will be for them an unspeakable joy!

TRANS> And so you see what a great difference there will be between the wise and the foolish!

- Oh that you might all be wise!
- Here the conclusion of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 25:13:

III. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

A. To “**watch**” means to be alert to the reality of His coming!

1. My friends, He really is going to come!
 - This is not just a nice little imaginary hope that Christians carry along to help them get through...
 - The same LORD who created heaven and earth is going to come to judge the world...
 - The same LORD who expelled Adam and Eve from the garden and cursed the human race with death and misery on account of our sin is coming...

- The same LORD who delivered Israel out of Egypt and who promised salvation to the world through them is coming to judge....
 - The same LORD who was, in accordance with prophecy, born of virgin and who went about among His people healing the sick and raising the dead, and who went to the cross to bear our sins is coming to judge...
 - The same LORD who rose again from the dead and was given in His risen flesh a kingdom and dominion that will never be taken away is coming to judge...
 - The same LORD who said His word would go into all the world and who has sent it to call us to repent and believe that we might be saved is coming to judge...
 - The same LORD who at this very moment holds your breath in His hand is coming to judge.
 - Make no mistake about it!
 - We are at best only half awake to this reality!
 - If we were more than this, how differently we would live!
 - How great our joy and our hope would be!
 - How devout and holy our lives would be!
 - How earnest our warnings to our children and to our neighbours!
 - But our doubt does not make the reality of His coming any less certain except to our own minds.
2. He is coming and you need to prepare now!
- This is not something to put off to another time.
 - What tragedy it would be if he should come and find you unprepared!
 - “Let us leave this parable,” says J C Ryle, “with a settled determination never to be content with anything short of indwelling grace in our hearts.”

B. But what are you to do to obtain that grace? to obtain the oil of the Spirit?

1. You are to buy oil—without money and without price—while it is still the time of buying!
 - Repent of your sin before God—hate it, turn from it as that which has separated you from Him...
 - Believe on the LORD Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin...look to His suffering for sin and cast yourself on Him for forgiveness.
 - Ask the LORD to give you His Holy Spirit and He will...

- The Spirit is given to those who have looked to Jesus Christ so that they might abide in Him—
 - so that they might live in true communion with God as those who are reconciled with Him...
 - You have not been reconciled if you are not living in communion with God—loving His law and delighting to obey it from within...
 - If you are not doing that, you are still cut off from Him—you do not have the Spirit.
 - There is no point in being forgiven if you are not reconciled...
 - Forgiveness is supposed to restore the relationship.
2. You see, the Holy Spirit is the oil that Christ gives to all who believe so that we may live unto God—in true fellowship with Him.
- a. Just as we saw in our Old Testament reading from Zechariah today,
 - The oil from Christ is what keeps the lamp burning.
 - It is not by might nor by power, but by God’s Spirit that the lamp burns.
 - b. The great question for you then is this...
 - Are you now connected to Jesus Christ?
 - Is the oil flowing into your very heart and life?
 - I don’t ask you if you have a profession that the elders have accepted...
 - I ask you if you have the very life of God’s Spirit sustaining you, feeding you, making your light shine!
 - If you do not have **this** oil,
 - you may have enough grace to satisfy the world and the church,
 - but your lamp will go out on the day of judgement and you will be shut out from the Lord and from the glory of His presence forever.
 - This is not something to be unsure about.
 - c. How can you be sure?
 - It is by abiding in Christ, by receiving His Spirit...
 - You do that by abiding in His Word—do not neglect it, receive it earnestly and eagerly...
 - And it is not just reading, but implementing the word into heart and life—diligently applying it.

- It is by earnest prayer, yearning in prayer for the life of God to be full and rich in your soul.
- Perhaps I should just use the words of Peter as he begins his second letter:
 - 2 Peter 1-11: Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption *that is* in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.