

"The Door Will Close"

Text: Matthew 25:1-13

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. - Ephesians 3:20-21

Dear Fellow Christians:

If you've ever flown standby you are probably well aware of the relief of those six magic words: *"The cabin door has been closed."* In case you've never flown standby, here's why those words are pure music to the ears of those who do. Standby passengers typically are not assigned a seat until the gate attendants are sure that every single *paying* customer has a seat. That means standby passengers have no idea if they are going to get a seat on any flight until about 15 minutes prior to departure. Not a big deal if you aren't on a tight schedule and can just drive home again. Big deal if you are thousands of miles from home and need to get somewhere. Worse still, even if you are issued a seat, my wife and I have found out the hard way that you are still not in the clear. If a paying customer shows up at the last minute and there are no open seats, you are asked to *"gather up your belongings and exit the aircraft"* and you get to do "the standby walk of shame."

That's why those six words (*"The cabin door has been closed"*) come with such welcome relief. Once the doors are closed, you're on. They never reopen those doors to take passengers off – which is great if you are tucked nice and comfy in your seat. Those same words have the opposite effect on those who didn't make the gate in time. In fact they are pretty much the very last words you want to hear, because just as no one gets *off* the plane after the door is closed, so also no one gets *on*.

Now image we're not talking about the door of an airplane but the door of heaven, and the opposing sentiments are increased exponentially. One thing is certain: the door of heaven will one day close. All that remains to be determined is on which side of that closed door each soul will spend eternity. This is the message of our text for this morning. That text is the verbally inspired word of God found recorded in the 25th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel, beginning with Verse 1:

^{ESV} **Matthew 25:1-13** ***"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.***

These are God's words – the *very words of God*, recorded and preserved down through the ages so that we also, on this day, might hear and learn from them. That these words would have God's desired effect in our hearts, so we pray, ***"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

Our loving Savior-God has a wonderful way of using circumstances to snap us back out of our trivial, superficial, self-centered shell and to redirect our attention and our sense of perspective and relative worth. In plain English, he uses your friend's recent heart attack to remind you how relatively unimportant is the decline in your 401k balance or the final score of a football game.

Damaging the family car reminds us of how infinitely more valuable are the occupants *in* that car, rather than the car itself. You get the point. In fact I'm sure each of you can add a thousand different examples of the same sorts of things that have happened to you – events that have served to remind you of just how trivial we human being can be – especially when times are relatively good – and how much we need occasional (or frequent) realignment.

With that understanding we join those ten virgins in our text. Understand the customs and background involved here. In Bible times it was customary for virgins to await the arrival of a bridegroom with lamps, and, when he arrives, to escort him into the bridal banquet hall, their lamps lighting the way. Don't miss one of the key points here. Those virgins have one job, one role to play in such events: they wait for the bridegroom and guide him to the wedding hall. That's it – that's their one and only job. To fail in that one job is therefore to fail all, to fail completely. In our text that means that half of those professing to be all about waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom failed utterly in their one task.

Obviously Jesus is talking about more here than a simple wedding. In this parable Jesus himself is the bridegroom and the virgins are those Christians of all generations who await his return on Judgment Day. The number 10, you will recall, is often the number of completion used in the Bible. In this case it is very likely symbolic of the total number of professing Christians in all generations.

What then of the oil? Various Bible scholars attach slightly different meanings to the oil, as well as to the lamp and to the fire. Since Jesus didn't explicitly spell it out for us, this is what we call "an open question." The general consensus is fairly consistent – the oil, the lamp, and the flame are intended as a picture of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God's grace in Jesus Christ, true saving faith, and the fruits of that faith. My personal understanding is that the oil is the grace and power of God's Word and the flame represents faith and the fruits thereof. God's Word creates and sustains saving faith, and saving faith always produces works.

Take this picture and apply it to our shared spiritual existence. Many profess to be Christians who are anxiously awaiting the return of their Lord. Jesus' parable warns us that a significant percentage will fail in this, and they will fail because their faith fails – or in some cases was never there to begin with. Faith fails when we cut ourselves off from the power of God's Word – and that is, or ought to be, a truly sobering fact. It is certainly intended to get our attention, but it is not intended to cause doubt among those who really are true believers. In other words, while hypocrites are hereby warned (and should be utterly terrified) it was never Jesus' intention to create doubt or fear in the minds of his faithful children.

You recall in our text how the foolish virgins were sent to the store to buy more oil. Imagine that scenario. How much do you suppose they would have been willing to spend for that oil that they so desperately needed? Clearly whatever it took. They would gladly give whatever they had. In that context the value of the oil (that Word of God that creates and sustains saving faith) is priceless. Ask it this way: *What would any human being pay on the great and terrible Day of Judgment for that which would rescue them from an eternity in hell and gain an eternity in heaven?* Anything and everything – without question and without reservation or hesitation. The horror and the frustration of all unbelievers will only be compounded by the fact that such oil was once freely available to all, but will be unavailable for any price after the door is closed. You have it when you need it, or you don't.

When the cost of anything goes up dramatically, doesn't it make you think about how smart it would have been to have purchased a healthy supply in advance and to have stored it for future use? The power of God's Word is like that. While only the Holy Spirit can create saving faith in our hearts, the increase and strengthening of that faith is available to every single human being – free of charge – right now. **“Ask, and it shall be given to you.”** Read and study your Bibles, and it will be yours – which is probably the greatest part of the horror that will be experienced by every single "foolish virgin" on Judgment Day. On that Day they will know beyond a shadow of any possible

doubt that each of them could have had, without cost or limit, that one thing they so desperately needed. And yet once the door is closed, it is too late. Forever too late.

Did you notice in our text how the foolish virgins went immediately to the other virgins to get some of their oil? Typical behavior, isn't it, to expect that someone else should make up for my foolishness? No one is saved by someone's else's faith. In other words, it is foolish to imagine that proximity to other believers who *did make use of the power of God's Word*, and thereby had their faith sustained, will somehow save anyone. That means that the fact that your father or mother studied their Bibles and went to church – which strengthened and sustained their faith – will not save you. The fact that you are a member of a church that offers this power will not, in itself, save you. The strength and power you only *pretended* to have will not save you. Nor can anything else strengthen or preserve saving faith. You can't get what you need from nature – no matter “how close you feel to God.” It's not available on a deer stand, fishing boat, in your bed, or on the lake – unless the Word of God is there. Saving faith is created and sustained only through the means of grace, the power that comes from God's Word alone.

Our text is designed to clear away the nonsense with which we fill our lives nearly every single day and to remind us just how much of what occupies us in this life really has no lasting value whatsoever. I am consistently amazed at how often I need to be reminded of this simple fact, and therefore also how quickly I forget and how easily I am distracted. Maybe your experience is the same.

So it is on this and every other Sunday we focus not on the temporal but on the spiritual. We dwell not on what offers temporary happiness in this life alone, but on that which leads to unending joy in heaven. That is why here we focus always on the Word of God – on Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins he has won for each of us. The world, with its seductive hollow philosophies, continually wears us down and seeks to draw us away. They make us increasingly drowsy while we wait. They cause us to lose sight of our one and only purpose and goal in life. Yet we note with great joy and comfort that although all of the virgins in our text were lulled to sleep by the long wait for the bridegroom, the faith of all did not fail. The five that entered the celebration were the five sustained and strengthened by God's Word.

There is no mystery here as to how saving faith is created, strengthened, and sustained. Jesus once told his disciples: ***"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*** (John 8:31-32) Hear these words! You are among those who have been blessed with true, saving faith in Jesus Christ. You believe that you have not and cannot make up for your sins, but that Jesus has paid that debt for you. Recognize and thrill to the fact that if you can honestly say that you trust what Jesus Christ did for you as the full and complete payment for all of your sins, then you are even now fully prepared to meet your God at his coming. You have been washed clean of every stain of every sin. Jesus did that for you. He has placed you on the right side of that door that will one day close.

The only question that therefore remains is how you can remain in that good place that has been given to you. Your faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brought you to faith through the power of his Word, and that is the same means by which he will preserve you in that saving faith. Yet that power cannot be yours, cannot strengthen and preserve you, if you cut yourself off from it. On the other hand, what you receive every time you do avail yourself of the power of God's Word is, quite literally, priceless. It provides you, even now, with that which cannot be obtained at any price once the Lord closes the door of your earthly life.

Thank God then for the means of grace, and surround yourself with it, every single day, and you will know only perfect and unending joy and peace when the door of time finally closes. Amen.