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SERMON XVIII.

THE FOOLISH VIRGINS.

ST. MATTHEW XXV. 8.—“Our lamps are gone out.”

THESE are simple words; some of us may deem them trifling; but when considered in their spiritual meaning, they are very solemn and affecting. No one indeed can think seriously of them without offering up a most earnest prayer, that whatever be the sorrows awaiting him, he may never experience the anguish of using this complaint as his own.

Are any of us then in danger of falling into this misery? We are. And which of us? All! more especially those who think themselves the farthest from it. Condemn not this as a hard saying. It is no more than the merciful Jesus himself plainly declares. His subject in this parable is self-deception. He begins with an alarming description of those whom it misleads and ruins.

I. Look at *the persons to whom these lamps belonged.*

Marriages among the Jews are solemnized in the evening. While their famed city stood, it was customary for the bridegroom, when the ceremony was ended, to lead his bride from her father's house to his own. This was not done privately, but with all the pomp and display which the parties could command. Their female friends were invited to grace the procession. These, arrayed in festal dresses and each carrying a lamp, assembled near the dwelling of the bride, and, as soon as the bridegroom led her forth, received them with loud acclamations; and then, forming a train, conducted them, with songs and every demonstration of joy, to their future home. There a feast was provided, from which strangers, and all but these select and invited guests, were carefully excluded.

A ceremony of this kind is now before us. Five virgins are pointed out to us as waiting, with lamps in their hands, for an expected bridegroom. But these are not alone. Five virgins more are gathered together on the same spot and on the same errand. They form indeed but one company with the other five. Nor is this circumstance strange. They are, like them, virgins; they wear the same bridal dress; they carry lamps of a similar kind. And not only so; they profess to be expecting the same bridegroom.

You know, brethren, who this bridegroom is. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, that Being of wonderful grace, who styles himself the Husband of his church, and often calls that chosen and beloved church his bride. It is plain then that we must not go among our thoughtless and ungodly neigh-

bours for the persons represented here. These evidently care nothing about the coming Saviour, and can, in no sense of the words, be said to “go forth to meet him.” We must look for them among ourselves. The parable tells us that they are the friends and companions of the people of God, mixed with them, and so much like them, that no human eye can at once, if at all, perceive the difference. They are men of blameless lives, and, to all appearance, of heavenly hearts; men who think of Christ, and expect Christ, and have given up worldly sins and worldly follies, that they may be prepared to welcome Christ at his appearing.

Mark the faithfulness of this blessed Teacher. Passing over in silence the great multitude of those who openly despise him, turning away our eyes from every wavering, suspicious follower of his cross, he bids us fix them on the few who are esteemed the most excellent in his church, and while we are wishing our souls in their souls’ stead, he tells us that among the most admired of these, are the men who will one day cry out in the bitterness of their hearts, “Our lamps are gone out.”

II. Our next enquiry then must be into the meaning of this cry. It comes from the group of virgins at which we have been looking. Five of them suddenly discover that the lamps which they had brought with them to throw a light and brilliancy around the bridegroom, are just expiring.

We can be at no loss to discover what we are to understand by *their going out*. In the language of scripture, light is often used for hope, prosperity, joy. The extinguishing of a light must mean therefore the destruction of these things, the end of our happiness and honour. Thus Job uses the figure. “How oft,” he says, “is the candle of the wicked put out!” And thus Solomon employs it; “The light of the righteous rejoiceth, but the lamp of the wicked shall be put out.” These passages will explain the text. The men it refers to, carry a lamp; that is, they make a visible profession of religion—not of that ordinary kind of religion, which consists in being called after the name of Christ, which brings us to his house and his table, and then leaves us at liberty to think no more of him;—these men profess to love Christ, to desire his coming, to be prepared and waiting for it. And up to a certain point, they are sincere; they imagine themselves ready to meet their God. But their lamps go out; their profession comes to an end; all the hopes which they have grounded on it, perish. They are in darkness, precisely in the same state in which death and judgment find those who have never heard of a Saviour.

We begin now to perceive that this simple complaint conveys a very serious truth. It tells us that of those who have long appeared to themselves and others the ardent friends of Christ, many will eventually discover them-

selves to be utter strangers to him. It brings the matter nearer home. It bids us tremble for ourselves. It reminds us that the most zealous and honoured of us all may be Christians in appearance only; that notwithstanding all we have heard, all we have felt and done, we may be found in the end altogether unprepared for our descending Lord, as empty of all true religion as the darkest heathen.

Do you ask how this strange thing can be? Go to the parable for an answer.

III. Consider the reason why the lamps of these virgins ceased to burn, *the cause of their going out.*

This must be traced, in the first instance, to their own inconsideration and negligence. They were “foolish” virgins. Satisfied with providing for the present hour, they wanted that wisdom which expects a future hour of need, and lays up in store a supply for it. They “took their lamps,” and lighted them. Thus far all was well; but “they took no oil with them,” that is, no store of oil. The consequence was, when the cry was made, “Behold, the bridegroom cometh,” they saw with dismay that their lamps were expiring.

The question is then, what does this oil represent? The power of the Holy Ghost. The grace which he pours into the Christian’s heart, and which he himself has taught us to call “the anointing which abideth in us.” But what is this? It is something within a man, which makes him feel himself a lost, undone sinner, and causes him to look on Christ as a great and precious Saviour. Something that softens his heart when it is hard, and warms it when it is cold, and quiets it when it is troubled. It is something which changes, and sanctifies, and humbles, and guides him, and makes him meet for heaven. It is the spring of all true religion, its food, its life, its substance, its all in all.

Of this the men here alluded to are destitute. Perhaps they have never really known their need of it. There is no deep sense of sin in them, no feeling of helplessness, no aiming at high and heavenly things, no sustained, persevering effort to draw near to God. All is form, or doctrine, or outward display; cold and dead.

Perhaps they conceive that they have this Spirit. Something has passed within them, which they mistake for it—a work of conscience perhaps, a play of feeling, a soaring of the imagination. In some cases, a melting and burning of the heart. These things satisfy them. They keep up their profession and their hopes for a time; but, in the end, they give way, they wear out. And they have nothing left. And why is this? The fault is their own. They have not the Spirit, because they never sought the Spirit. The Lord said, “Come;” the Spirit himself said, “Come;” ministers and friends urged

them to come, to ask at the throne of mercy for enlightening, saving grace; but in vain. Not a single earnest prayer did they ever offer for the precious blessing. They were content to go down to the grave, they were content to go up to judgment, with no more religion in their hearts, than corrupt nature had planted there, and their own poor strength maintained.

IV. Let us pass on now to a fourth point—*the hour when the lamps of these careless virgins were extinguished,*

1. This was not before midnight came; consequently *not till they had burnt a considerable time.* And a man may go on long, as well as go far, in a religious profession, and yet “fail of the grace of God.” Build a house on the sand; it is not every storm that will beat it down. It is not every sunny hour that will scorch the corn which springs up on a rock. Nor is it every sermon, nor every warning or affliction, which can strip the self-deceiver bare. Many never have their eyes opened till death stares them in the face; nay, there is a confidence, and a false one too, which the near prospect of a fiery judgment cannot shake. These very virgins are alarmed one hour; but where are they the next? At the bridegroom’s door. And what are they doing there? Rending the air with their wailings and self-reproaches? No. They are demanding admittance. They are saying, “Lord, Lord, open to us.”

2. These lamps went out *when their light was most needed.* It was midnight, a dark hour. The bridegroom too was at hand, and the virgins must have a lamp burning, or they cannot meet him.

We always need the grace of the Holy Spirit. There is not an hour nor a moment, in which we can be either happy or safe without it. There are however seasons in which our need of it is especially great and pressing. And these are the very times when the hopes of the self-deceiver perish. A day of trouble is one of them. The hour of death is another—on this side of the grave, the most appalling of all. At a distance, it is nothing. We think of it with composure; but no tongue can tell how death appears when it is close at hand. None but the dying know what it is to die. A sinking body, a receding world, a dark, lonely grave, loathsome corruption, the frightful worm—these are not trifles. They make us shiver as we think of them in connection with a lost friend or child. But a guilty spirit, an offended God, an unknown, strange eternity—these surprise the soul by the reality which they assume, they overwhelm it by their importance. In such an hour, no slight hopes will support us. If conscience does its work, nothing but the liveliest faith, the firmest hold of the divine promises, can give us one moment’s quiet. O what an hour for all our hopes to leave us! O what a time to discover our goodness to be sin, our religion a delusion! Flesh and heart failing, the world useless, and the heaven we had so often deemed our own,

out of our sight! And what is near? We know not. Nothing at which we dare to look.

But let this hour be past. Let conscience sleep. Let it be an hour of calmness;—we must feel our need of the grace of Christ when it is gone. We shall be in a world of spirits: not hearing of eternity, but in it; not thinking of a judgment-seat, but trembling before it; not saying, “Is there a God?” but seeing him; not musing about heaven and hell, but standing on their borders, within a step of their pains or joys, with only a moment between us and an everlasting home. No self-righteous hope can stand in such an hour as this. It may have rooted itself very deeply in the mind. We may have carried it about with us all our life long. It may have stood firm against many a sermon and many a providence; it may have triumphed over the plainest declarations of the Bible, and borne unmoved the shock of death; but take it into eternity, bring it among the realities of that unseen world;—where is it? It is gone. One moment has turned it into immoveable despair.

3. The lamps of these virgins went out at an hour *when they could not be re-kindled*; at least, not re-kindled in time for their intended purpose. “Give us of your oil,” said they to their wise companions, “for our lamps are gone out.” “Not so,” answered the others, “lest there be not enough for us and you; but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.” They went. The shops were probably near; “but while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready, went in with him to the marriage; and the door was shut.”

We all know that in worldly things, time is occasionally of wonderful value. A minute, a moment, may be worth all we possess. Property, or health, or life, may depend on the twinkling of an eye. A house is in flames. One man escapes; in an instant, another is at the door; but the roof falls, and he is buried in the ruins. My child is struggling in the water. I rush to save it, and my hand is within a span of its body; but it sinks and is lost.

Now go to spiritual things. The change which time makes there, is unspeakably great. We are now within reach of all that sinners can receive, or that God can give. Grace, mercy, salvation, heaven, all may be obtained by every one of us in the easiest way, on the freest terms—simply in this way, through faith in Christ—on these terms, by only asking for them, by really stretching forth our worthless hand to receive them. But let a few years pass away—not all the prayers and cries that misery wrings from us, can procure one drop of water to cool our tongues.

Place us on our death-beds. If we despise the grace of heaven now, can we find it then? We may desire it; we may make the ears of our friends tingle by our piercing cries for it; but a death-bed prayer! it is like the shriek of a man who is overtaken by flames. The Bible gives us the history of four

thousand years. How many sinners do we read of there converted and saved in the last few hours of life? One. And when did he find mercy? In the most wonderful hour of all that history. It was an hour of prodigies. The sun was darkened, the rocks were rending, the graves of the dead were opened, and then the Lord of glory gave up the ghost, and a dying thief was saved.

Place us in eternity. Never since created being breathed in it, has mercy been found for the first time there. Angels could never find it, nor can ruined man. "Now," brethren, "is the accepted time," the only accepted time; "now is the day," the only day, "of salvation." There is hope nowhere but on earth. Here the sinner's road to heaven begins. There is not another in all the universe of God.

V. And what if these things should befall us? What if our hopes should fail, and we be found at the last without the grace of God? This parable foretells *the consequences*.

1. The expiring of their lamps *taught these virgins the value of that which they before thought needless*; it led them most anxiously to seek it. They ask oil of their companions. They hasten, in the depth of night, to buy it.

The discovery they made concerns ourselves. We are now of many minds concerning spiritual things. A few of us deem them of the utmost possible importance. We consider grace and mercy, a new and holy heart, as the greatest of all conceivable blessings. Others wonder at our choice. They look on vital religion, the religion which lifts up the soul above the world, as a useless thing. In their eyes, it is enthusiasm, it is a being righteous overmuch, it is at best an ideal plaything, the dream of fools.

Others take a different view of the matter. This religion, they think, is desirable; it may be almost necessary. "But then," they say, "it is so cheerless, so melancholy; we cannot love it. It robs us of the few pleasures we can find in this careworn world, and, while we live, it gives us nothing in return for them."

Sooner or later however, there will be but one opinion amongst us all. And what is that? We find it here. We shall deem the grace of Christ the one thing needful. We shall look on the world, with all its pleasures and cares, its joys and sorrows, its love and hatred, as of no more importance than a shadow that is departed, than a vision of the night.

Go up to heaven. Ask the redeemed who are singing there, what they most prize. The answer is, "Salvation." Go down to hell, and ask the weeping there what they most need. No other sound comes through the darkness, than "Salvation." Come back again to earth. Ask us within these walls what we most desire. O what a multitude of answers is in a moment heard! Money; pleasure; sin; the applause of a few dying rebels; the affection of a

worm. But collect us again when a hundred years are gone; put the same question once more to us;—we too have learned the language of eternity. We ask for salvation. We no longer say in our hearts, “The world now, and God hereafter.” This is our cry, “O save us! Give us grace! Give us mercy! Better to be a converted, pardoned sinner, than an unpardoned angel.” And how will this great change be wrought? By death; by our being forced to look on things in the light of eternity; by blessed or woeful experience in another world.

2. Observe one thing more — *these virgins were excluded from the marriage feast*, “While they went to buy” the oil they needed, the bridegroom passed along. He reached his house amidst the lights and songs of his happy friends; and when he had welcomed them to his feast of joy, “the door was shut.” “Afterwards came also the other virgins,” but the door moves not. No entreaties can unloose its bars. “Lord, Lord,” they say, “open to us.” But no; he disowns them. “He answered and said, Verily, I say unto you, I know you not.” And why are they thus rejected? There was room enough and to spare within those walls. The provisions were most abundant. These virgins appeared as well attired and as worthy as the other guests. No crime was laid to their charge. All their offence was this—they had no oil when the bridegroom came; and for this they must be banished from his house for ever.

Even in worldly affairs, a trifling error may be followed by very serious consequences. A step too many may plunge us down a precipice. A medicine taken by one, which was intended for another, may endanger the healthiest life. But what so fatal as the mistake that concerns our souls? It is the design of Christ in several of his parables, to show us the danger of an error here. Look at the house that the winds and floods beat down. Why did it fall, while another, raised at the same time, stood? Only because it was not founded on a rock. Why was the guest driven from the wedding supper of the king? Solely because he had not on a wedding garment. And here is a company of invited friends excluded from another bridal feast, because, at a midnight hour, their lamps are gone out, and excluded by the bridegroom himself, and at the very time when his heart is full of kindness, and a multitude around him is made happy by his love.

O brethren, as you dread destruction, dread mistakes. “They are harmless,” says an unbelieving world. “They are trifles,” say your own foolish hearts. “They are truths,” whispers Satan. But all this while, these harmless errors, these trifles, these seeming truths, are filling hell. It is not a solitary spirit that they have ruined. Five out of these ten virgins are in darkness, when they expected to enter into the bridegroom’s joy. And what is our Lord’s testimony in another place? “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.” How many then will he ex-

clude? Hear his answer; “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord; and then will I profess unto them, I never knew you. Depart from me.”

We must now end. And what have we learned from the things we have heard? It is but a little while ere this picture will become a reality. The scenes here portrayed will soon be acted. We shall see them. We shall bear a part in them. What will that part be? Will our lamps be burning when the Bridegroom comes, or will they be gone out in darkness? Shall we sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, at the marriage supper of the Lamb, or shall we be banished from “the glory of his power” for ever? We cannot look into futurity. We can however look into our own hearts and lives. O that we may strive to get from them a faithful answer to this simple, but tremendous question, Shall I live for ever in heaven, or in hell? What say appearances now?

Do you carry a lamp? Do you profess to be waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven? Then let not that lamp content you. Trust not in that profession. Beware of a superficial, outside religion. It is the character of all the false religions that deceive the world. It is the religion of multitudes in this Christian land. But it is not the religion which can save your souls. Nothing leads to heaven, but the grace that comes down from heaven, the regenerating, transforming, purifying grace of the Holy Ghost. And O how easy is it to imagine ourselves possessed of this, when we are as destitute of it as a corpse of life! Be fearful. Be in earnest. Be honest with yourselves. Search your hearts. Rest not till you can discover there the working of a mighty God. Not deep convictions merely, not lively impressions or serious thoughts only, but a change from death unto life, a thorough conversion from sin to holiness, from the world to Christ. Look at the door of heaven. It is open, wide as infinite power and love can throw it; but what is the writing which it bears above it? “A holy world.” “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Are your lamps already gone out? or are they going out? Do any of you suspect that you shall wake up in darkness in another world? That suspicion may be the greatest blessing of your life. You cannot think so perhaps. You view your fears in a different light. They are very humiliating to you, and very painful. The thought of being far from God, while all your life long you have imagined yourselves drawing near to him, is almost more than you can bear. But if the case really be so, the discovery must in the end be made; and where would you wish to make it? Here, in a world of mercy; or hereafter, in a world of wrath? What if the bridegroom had sent a messenger to rouse these slumbering virgins before midnight came? What if he had bid them look on their expiring lights and empty vessels, only a few short minutes before his appearing? Harsh as his voice might sound, it

would have saved them all their misery and shame. The Lord Jesus Christ has awakened you. The work is his. Without him, no minister, no sermon, could effect it. And why has he done it? In compassion to your souls. O praise him for his grace! Say not, with Jacob, "All these things are against me!" but say rather with the wife of the fearful Manoah, "If the Lord were pleased to kill us, he would not have showed us all these things, nor would, as at this time, have told us such things as these."

But you must bestir yourselves, brethren. Your chief dangers are these three;—delay; but this will not bear a thought; there is ruin in it. These virgins lost but a moment, and yet, "while they went to buy, the bridegroom came." Here lies another peril—in efforts to trim your extinguished lamps, to revive your hopes by greater earnestness in your former course. You might as well attempt to make the dead move and act. And then comes a third danger—mistaking a discovery of your danger for your remedy, a desire after grace for grace itself. Beware of these things. Lose no time in vain lamentations. Regard your past religion as a cheat. Begin anew. Your grand defect has been a want of inward, enlightening, converting grace. It is still your most pressing want, almost your only one. And O how easily may it be supplied! "Go ye to them that sell, and buy for yourselves." Apply for the Spirit to him who has "the residue of the Spirit;" to him who purchased it for sinners with his tears and blood; to him who has been for six thousand years dispensing it to every one that has asked it of him; to him who gave it to Noah, and Abraham, and Paul, and who will rejoice to give it you; and to give it you freely, "without money and without price." Christ is our light. To Christ then let the prayer go up from every heart, "Lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death."

Are your lamps still burning? Have you reason to hope that the religion which you profess, is a religion of the heart? a religion which has the Holy Spirit for its author? Then be assured that it will have heaven for its end. Whence came the grace that first separated you from a thoughtless world? Whence comes the grace that renews your spiritual life day by day? that reminds you of Christ when you forget him, and keeps you waiting and longing for his appearing? It comes from the heavenly Bridegroom himself. And why does he give it you? That he may have you for his companions and friends, for his joy and his praise, in the day of his glory.