

The Oil in Our Lamps

Matthew 25:1-13

This is stewardship Sunday when we think of sharing what we have with others. But then how do we deal with the parable Jesus tells about the ten virgins? The five wise virgins have enough oil, but they refuse to share with the others. And since they are called “wise,” we assume they are commended, they are the “good guys” in this story. What kind of example is that for stewardship?

We need to see what is meant by “oil.” To set the whole scene we have to understand a little about weddings in Jesus’ time, especially what He would have experienced growing up in a town like Nazareth. When we have weddings, an invitation is sent out to the guests with an exact calendar date and time. Back then they didn’t have clocks—or should I say cell phones—to tell time. The wedding was not an hour at church and then a few hours at a community center for a reception. It involved the whole village, because the whole village was invited—and they were all probably related to each other. The wedding began when the groom and his buddies went from his house to the house of the bride’s family. They would have a little ceremony there, then go off to the groom’s house where the main party took place. Their coming and going was like a parade. This could happen at any time, usually in the middle of the night. The girls of the village had the job of lighting the way as the groom and his friends went out. Their “lamps” were actually torches—a stick with cloth wrapped around in dipped in oil. For these girls this was their chance to be noticed by the young men of the village—their chance to be something in a village in which they were normally nothing.

The wise virgins had oil in clay jars, so that when the parade started, they could cut off the burnt part of their rags and start a good flame with the oil poured on the rest of the cloth. The foolish ones couldn’t get a good flame because they had no oil. They had had time to buy the oil beforehand, but when they did go they were too late and missed everything.

Jesus uses this story to tell us to be ready for the big “parade” when He comes again. He doesn’t want us to be caught napping. This is the first of three parables He tells in Matthew 25 as He warns about the end of the world. And He tells this to the

disciples during the week He is going to die on the cross.

But why don’t the wise virgins share their oil? If we think of their “oil” as being their possessions, then they would not be commended by Jesus. The last of the three parables Jesus tells in Matthew 25 is the final judgment where He says, “Whatever you do to one of the least of these, you do it unto Me.” The oil is not a possession. It is faith. We speak of “sharing our faith,” but that does not mean we can give it to another person. The foolish virgins had no oil. It wasn’t that they ran out. Sharing faith is like sharing joy. We can tell others and show it to others, but we can’t make them have our joy. It has to become their joy. The wise virgins tell the foolish ones to purchase more oil. This doesn’t mean we can purchase faith, but people can never get faith from us. No, they have to go to the “store,” to the only one who can give faith—God.

What does this say about stewardship? Aren’t we supposed to give to others? A young Chinese student came here this summer thirsty to learn the Bible. He had difficulties dealing with his sister who he was living with. He asked, “How do I make her happy? How do I make her a Christian?”

When we think like that, it is not stewardship. Stewardship is about giving—but about giving what we really have. We can only give what God gives us.

In our relationships with other people we so often focus on what others need to do. “If only my wife didn’t spend so much?” “If only my husband would pick up after himself.” “If only he would listen to me?” “If she would just be a little more patient.” We become experts at what is wrong with the other person and see so brilliantly how he or she can solve his or her problems.

But guess what? We can’t do anything about that. God hasn’t given that to us. We cannot make someone do anything unless we force them to do it. That works when the relationship is built on authority like a boss with a worker, a sergeant with a private, a teacher with a student, and a parent with a child. But in our relationship with other people as Christians, if we force or manipulate people to do anything, that has nothing to do with faith. As

Christians we are not called to “make” anyone do anything. We are called to love.

What God has given us is ourselves. He has given us the gift of faith which leads us to love others. Love leads us not to say, “If only he did this?” or “Why can’t she do that?” but “What can I do?” We can give things to help others. We can live out our faith as an example to others. But we can’t make them believe. We can’t “share” our “oil.”

But God can do that. He is the one who changes lives. He is the one who brings people to faith. He is the one alone who can do what we cannot. Stewardship is above everything else recognizing that.

If I can’t share my “oil,” then what can I do? As we reach out to help others it is important that we change our goals from “he” or “she” goals to “my” goals. I shouldn’t say, “I will get him to come to church,” or “I will get her to stop being so negative about herself.” or “I will make them more pleasant to be around.” Instead I say, “I will invite him to come with me to church,” or “I will say encouraging things to her, but even more listen to her,” or “I will be a pleasant as I can be around them.” We can’t make anyone a Christian. But we can be Christians to them.

Stewardship is first and foremost recognizing what we have and then sharing that. Otherwise I can get wrapped up in what I cannot do or to just ignore it because I know it won’t make any difference. In a sense stewardship begins with “me,” before it involves anyone else. “oil” that only God can give. I need to take care of myself, not because I don’t care about others, but because if I don’t take care of what God has given me, I can’t help others. Stewardship is not just putting money in the collection plate or doing something for the church or the community. It is also praying to God, reading the Bible, going to Holy Communion, taking care of the “me” that God has given to me. God doesn’t command us simply to do things. He commands us to let Him do the doing through us.

That is how we can be the “wise” virgins—letting God keep the “oil” flowing to us so that we can take care of “me” and let God show through us His great love.

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