

PRAISE INTERNATIONAL
CHECK THE OIL
MATTHEW 25:1-13

Good Morning

Prayer Needs - Preston, Louise, Ann, Marks son
Prayer for Veterans

The one time I remember my father buying a new car was quit memorable. In the mid 70's this car was supposed to be a game-changer - aluminum block, new design. Its name in Arabic means 'descending Eagle' in Spanish it means beautiful Meadow - all I can say is that that yellow Vega was not beautiful and anything but majestic. Dad got it for my sisters to drive and almost immediately became a problem. What Chevy had not known was that this new engine was going to behave very differently that anything they had built before - as it got hot it lost fluids quickly and worse it burned oil like it was going out of style. The Vega that was supposed to provide reliable transportation for my sisters quickly started having problems. If memory serves me correctly the first thing to go was the clutch on the manual transmission - my sisters had never driven a manual car and often drove with the clutch slightly depressed. After the whole clutch issue my sisters had actually become pretty good at driving that little car. They didn't get any speeding tickets, no accidents they kept it gassed up...yet they made a huge critical error that was not related to the skill of their driving.

Their mistake was not an error of skill but of attention to the car itself - they drove it for months and did not check the oil...and the engine burned up. Again I don't have anyway of recalling the milage but it was a fairly new car when the engine block had to be replaced. What I do recall was the frustration of my father discovering that the engine failure was due to driving without oil. A story that was not easily forgotten and a question that was often called to my attention - did you check the oil in your vehicle? I had it drilled into me successful driving had was more than just knowing the skill of how to drive my vehicle but paying attention to the vehicle - specifically no matter how well the car drives - you have to check the oil!

In our text today in Matthew records a parable of Jesus where He points to the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven in His friends lives, the difference between light and darkness, being in or out, being known or unknown - to 'checking the oil' - the oil that would give light (photo).

Truth be told this parable can be challenging to rightly understand. The parable of the 10 virgins - 5 who were foolish and 5 who were prudent.

- The challenge can be two fold - first if we assume that Jesus is giving a picture of future judgment based on virtue. Here is one of the first challenges of Jesus parable - all 10 of the virgins are virtuous all of them are pure and have led pious lives. Remember Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of Heaven - and what causes the separation of 5 as wise and 5 as foolish is **NOT a lack of virtue** but what we will see in a bit is actually a lack of what He calls readiness.
- 5 of them assume their virtue is enough for the life they are in...in the light. But Jesus reveals the Kingdom as coming at midnight - in the darkness.
- The first error of the foolish virgins is not virtue but **assumption** about their oil.

The next challenge we see in the text is the idea of '**getting**' oil:

- This is where this text can get tricky if we conclude that the wise virgins managed to 'secure' what the foolish virgins did not meaning that we **focus on the idea of 'lack' a lack of what they have not secured** - then it becomes a **message of striving**.

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So what is the oil?

- Especially if it is not based in virtue and **where do they find it?**
- Truth be told we can read this parable and it can almost land us into a ‘works’ righteousness - yet the scripture clearly proclaims it is by Grace we are saved through faith and this not from ourselves it is a gift of God lest anyone boast....its all a gift!

So if we are going to take Jesus seriously and ‘check the oil’, we need to take a closer look at what is the oil? And also where do I find it?

- I have often heard this directly connected to the idea of our communion with God and our level of turning from and removing sin from our life - especially with the way Jesus words this story we can almost get the idea of building a reservoir of oil that will carry us into the night times of our lives - and if I am honest I have both heard it and taught it in that manner.

The more time I have spent in this text I have concluded that the oil is the Oil of Mercy. That Jesus is painting a picture of the wisdom of living lives surrendered to the abundant olive tree of many Mercies - the Cross! Oil that lights our own darkness, that can give light others, oil that is capable of lighting the darkest of spaces - and that beloved is really good news!

The three stories of Matthew 25 contain a common them of a ‘return’ of the bridegroom, master and judge - so perhaps you like me have always heard these passages with ‘future’ judgment message.

- Today though I want to invite us while we await that return, lets step away from that angst - can we hear the invitation of Jesus parable today? **In the darkness of our life and our world can we bring light?**
- What does it mean to be ‘wise’ to have oil in our life that bring that light into darkness.
- And here is what I find intriguing is that so often we conclude that it is the virtue of truth and purity that **brings light** - to ‘stand’ for the truth or fill in the blank...as if our passion for 'truth' and our fervor against what we see as obvious evil is the secret that brings light....spoken or not its the conclusion

Yet in Jesus parable it is not virtue that gives light - but oil.

- Jesus concludes the parable by pointing out that the bridegroom recognizes the true virgins not by the virtue but by their light produced by that oil.
- **Its not something they produce or provide – as they were encouraged to go get some.**
- **The Oil is not the result of their virtue or effort!**

So what is the oil? I believe the Oil is not something Mercy – lets look some things...

- Lazar Puhalo - former Archbishop of the Eastern Orthodox Church points out that **Olive Trees** were actually named after Mercy because the trees gave oil so abundantly and for so many goods that oil actually became a form of currency in the Palestinian region.
- Little wonder that in Greek the word for Oil and the word for Mercy sound the same and are almost spelled in the same way - **the visual picture for Gods people was pretty clear.**
- **Mercy?** Oh its like these trees that have provided for our us and our family.
- Interesting – even today one of the most punitive acts of war between Israel and Palestinians is when an olive grove is destroyed...because of its generational impact.

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So by the time we get to Jesus - Matthew records Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount He is talking about the regular practice of 'giving alms' to the poor.

- These were known as **acts of mercy** - that later Jesus clearly states are *laying up treasures in Heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves cannot break in and steal.*
- Later in the New Testament in Acts 9 an angel of the Lord says to Cornelius - '*Your prayers and acts of mercy have ascended as a memorial before God*'.

Then in two of those intertestamental books we talked about last week - 1st and 2nd Maccabees we read the story of the **miracle of the Hanukkah lights** - that goes something like this. As God's people were observing the Festival of booths and re-dedicating the temple following they lit the lamps with only enough oil for the lights to burn for one day and the oil burned for 8 days.

- So again by the time of Jesus the oil was connected in language - history, to **Mercy and Light!**

In the Orthodox tradition of the Church the a prayer service called Polyeleos is a night in which every lamp is lit - especially a large chandelier with oil and it is swung while the congregation chants Psalm 135-6.

- It is a rehearsal of the Superabundant Mercy of God - **the word Polyeleos meaning much oil or much mercy!**
- I bring up the service rehearsing the superabundant Mercy of God - because it gives us a clue about how? Psalm 135-136 were Psalms of ascent read together...on the way to worship.

How do we find the oil?

- I submit it comes by two means - to **Marvel and to Mourn.**

The Mercy of God is not a theological abstract idea but a reality that is encountered as we rehearse, remember, encounter and Marvel at the wonder of Mercy!

- I gain access to Mercy as I surrender to Mercy!
- **What this means is that I put my virtue in its place...**(Paul called it rubbish)
- I have peace, forgiveness access to His presence **because of Mercy!**
- **Advent is just about to begin** - may it be a season of wonder and marveling at Mercy!
- Amazing isn't it that we have no record of Jesus turning away the one who cried out for Mercy.
- Because the cry for Mercy is an admission of our need it is by its nature a choice to be vulnerable and to be amazed at the largeness of His lovingkindness.
- I will glory in nothing Paul's says but the Cross of Christ - its a Marvel that invites us to Marvel.

The Mercy of God is not just a reality to meet us in our weakness but to extend to others.

- Mercy arrives when we Marvel and when we Mourn
- At our own weakness and as we sit with others in their own weakness, brokenness and frailty.
- *Blessed are the merciful they will be shown - Mercy.*

Beloved the Oil is Mercy - the only way we encounter Mercy is in vulnerability to God and one another - interestingly similar to love isn't it.

- So lets not miss this - this Oil that brings light into our darkness to reveal who we actually are and who our neighbor actually is - comes not out of my virtue but out of my vulnerability to receive and extend Mercy.

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Where do we find this Oil? Interesting as we read the whole of chapter 25.

- **What they need, oil, is not found in the Bridegroom's hours, or the Masters estate or even the Judges chamber.**
- Jesus story has the virgins being told to go the market and its the final parable that identifies the market where mercy is given and received.

The actual market where mercy is given and received is in the life of others.

- In fact Jesus clarifies that this is where they will actually see **His face the face of Mercy** in the least, the last and the lowest.
- St. John Chrysostom said 'If you want more storehouses, you have them: in the bellies of the the poor'.

One last thought that hit me early morning this past week - if I look at this parable as Jesus tells the story. The filling of their lamps was not about the bridegroom's return but rather engaging in Mercy in the Market of their life.

- To those whose lamps were out of oil - the response almost seems harsh but it is telling. As the virgins ask to be let in based on their virtue - yet the reply is chilling mattering on your translation - *do I know you? to I don't know you.*
- This is not a 'secret' passcode fail - we are saved by grace through faith - but lets take another look.
- **Is this Jesus giving us a picture of those who choose to pretend their way through virtue and religious certainty but never engage in a life of Mercy that has both surrendered and extended mercy.**
- Because that is how I made you - *I know what you look like.* This fake facade that I don't know. **This is not about rejection but recognition!**

So where does story lead us? **The abundant Olive Tree of many-mercies - the Cross.**

I agree with Brad Jersak -

How do I acquire the oil of the Spirit that gains me entry to the Kingdom banquet? At the Cross. How do I receive God's mercy? At the Cross. How do I become merciful, in my deeds but more so in my character? At the Cross.

Just as the True Vine pours out the wine of the blood of Christ, so the True Olive Tree produces the oil of many mercies and the grace of the Holy Spirit. These parallel pictures--the wine-bearing vine and the oil-bearing olive tree--are images of the one Tree of Life, the Cross of Christ. While we await the some-day return of the Bridegroom-Master-Judge, we also encounter him in the now-day markets, dispensing the oil mercy and grace to and through those on the margins, behind the hedges and on the street corners. They are invited in, no matter how battered and broken ... and so are those graced by the Spirit to serve them. May we be virgins found faithfully filling our lamps with Jesus' oil and becoming familiar with his face now so that he's no stranger then.

Check the oil - Get oil - Oil Mercy - that lights our own darkness, that can give light others, oil that is capable of lighting the darkest of spaces - and that beloved is really good news!

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Closing Prayer and Communion

Prayer of thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies ,

we your servants give You humble thanks

for all Your goodness and loving kindness

to us and all whom You have made .

we bless You for our creation, preservation,

and all the blessings of this life ;

but above all for Your immeasurable love

in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ ;

for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

and, we pray, give us such an awareness of Your mercies ,

that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth Your praise ,

not only with our lips, but in our lives,

by giving up ourselves to your service,

and by walking before You

in holiness and righteousness all our days;

through Jesus Christ our Lord ,

to whom, with You and the Holy Spirit ,

be honor and glory throughout all ages .

Amen

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