

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

**By Eric Howell**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

**November 9, 2008**

In 165 B.C. Israel was in turmoil. For about forty years as a vassal under Syrian rule, Israel had experienced a relative measure of peace until Antiochus Epiphanes came to the Syrian throne. He desecrated the Jews' temple by making plans to erect a statue of Zeus right in the temple. The Jews were outraged, revolted, and in a reversal of most of their experiences...they won. Ha! They won. Amazing. So they rebuilt the looted temple, tearing down the offending statue, of course, and planned a marvelous celebration to commemorate the rededication of the temple, which would include relighting the holy lamps. So they got the big stuff. Everyone was so excited to get the Temple back right. This felt good. To restore it completely, to be free from outside rule and to do it the way they were sure God wanted it done. They tore out the altar to Zeus, fresh paint, replaced the stolen gold inlay, prepared the prayers and gathered all the people. But someone forgot a detail for the dramatic lighting. They didn't bring enough oil for the lamp.

I've planned or helped plan a lot of worship services and other kinds of church gatherings and large meetings. It's fun, but it's not easy. The big stuff is obvious. It's right in front of your face. For a worship service: when to sing, what to sing, what to say, who's to say it, what to preach, etc. Then there's the bulletin and getting all of it typed up, copied and ready to go. So there's the big, obvious stuff, and then there are details. And you know who's in the details. For a worship service, it can be who is sitting where, when does a person walk forward, stuff like that. Did you know that these folks coordinate the tone of the bells the children ring to match the first notes of the first song we sing? It's easy to overlook stuff like that. We all do pretty well with the obvious stuff right in front of our faces and sometimes miss the stuff that's not so urgent, not so pressing.

You experience this in life. The big stuff is obvious. Your daughter needs to go to school. But you miss the little stuff. You sent her with her pants on backwards. What, that wasn't you? You get the big stuff. You have a credit card bill. You miss the little stuff. Today's the 20<sup>th</sup>? You get the big stuff: Jesus told me I am a light shining on a hill. You miss the little stuff: How do I keep my light shining on that hill?

The temple lamp was supposed to be lit and then stay lit every single night. But there's not enough oil. There was only enough for maybe one night. So they sent someone out to get more oil, and the priest lit the lamp, fully expecting it to flicker and die that night, but it stayed lit. No one touched it and it stayed lit for 8 days. The miracle of the oil. Now celebrated today as Hanukkah by our Jewish friends.

Minus the miracle, that is essentially the situation that ten bridesmaids find themselves in in a story that Jesus tells that is supposed to teach us something about the kingdom of heaven. He begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like...." So when we hear this story we are supposed to be able to say, "Oh, that's what the kingdom of heaven is like." So it's about big things. Can't get any bigger or more important than that subject. But it's about

little things, less obvious things, too, and the impact of a little thing, something that seems insignificant at the time making all the difference at the moment that it all mattered. Sometimes it just comes down to having enough gas in your tank.

Ten bridesmaids are excitedly waiting for the groom with their lamps lit. Their assignment is to wait for him to arrive in town and then they will form a procession with him to his house for the festivities. So these ten women gather, light their lamps and wait. And wait. And wait. In a great gender reversal, HE's late for the wedding. So, one by one, the women, all of them, get drowsy and drift off to sleep. While they are sleeping, the groom finally approaches. They are roused from their sleep at midnight by a cry "He's coming!" They get up, grab their lamps, and trim them to repair them from hours of burning and freshen them up for the festivities, which now lie immediately and urgently ahead. Half of the women have brought extra oil to use if they needed it. So they have enough for the critical moment. The other half didn't have any in reserve. They only had just enough to get by. They didn't pay the price when it didn't matter and now they don't have the resources they need now that it does matter.

There is a whole lot about Christianity that is about what you do regularly, consistently, daily. The big moments get the attention, but mostly it's just about discipline, about doing the right thing over and over again. In the parable, those who are not prepared are not able to cram for this pop quiz. You can't drop pounds just before the surprise weigh-in. Sometimes you can't make it right in the moment of need and bring forth the resources you need if they are not already within you when the need comes.

You know what it's like to run out of oil, don't you? You stay up late working before you drop off to bed. But your child gets sick in the middle of the night. Do you have patience for that moment?

You receive a phone call from an old friend who is pretty irresponsible but needs your help again. Do you have grace for that moment?

You get the terrible news of the tragedy in your own family. Do you have faith for that moment?

You get into conversation with someone whose anger at God and the church is so great that they deride everything you hold dear. Do you have wisdom for that moment?

Do you have oil in your tank to keep your torch lit through the darkest, rainiest, scariest, loneliest nights of life? Jesus said that there will come a time when we see him face to face, a time when he comes in glory. But we don't know when. Are you ready for that moment? Jesus also said you will find me when you are face to face with those who are hungry and thirsty, those who are homeless and in prison. Are you ready for those moments when they come?

Anna Carter Florence tells this story: "At Columbia Seminary, where I teach, we give a lecture to the students about the spiritual life of the preacher. And one time during this lecture, we brought an oil lamp, the kind with a wick and real oil in the bottom, as a visual

aid. We talked about how the role of the pastor, or the role of Christian, for that matter, is to be a light for others -- “the light of the world.” Then we lit the wick and watched the lamp burn. But (and here was the rigged part), because there was only a tiny bit of oil in that lamp, it only burned for a few moments. We asked the students: what happens when the oil runs out? Well, then the lamp light goes out, and you have nothing to give. And a pastor with no oil, a Christian with no oil, can't be the light of the world for anybody, no matter how much they want to. So then we asked: what fills you up spiritually when you run dry? What replenishes your oil? Where do you find God, and how can you make sure that you get enough of that oil for your lamp, so that God can fill you up again? Because you will run dry. And when you do, you can't be a light for anybody. Remember the safety speech we hear on airplanes? ‘In the event of an emergency, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling; please be sure to secure your own oxygen mask first before assisting others.’”

After one whole month of serving as your pastor, I more and more appreciate that number one on my job description as pastor of DaySpring is that I will spend significant time in disciplined study and diligent prayer. For most of us pastors, this drops to last on the list. Can you believe that? It's true. We get busy like you do. We have things to do that are important and some that are urgent. Like you do. We have meetings and appointments like you do. And somehow we go through days, sometimes weeks without spending significant time in prayer and study. And our oil runs dry. The spiritual resources on which we depend for sustenance, creativity, insight, wisdom, and vocational purposefulness go to empty. So I'm thankful for the reminder from you that your vision for ministry begins with the deepening of the pastor's own personal spiritual journey with Christ. And a word to our staff: This applies to you too. You get busy. You have work to do and responsibilities and demands on your time that exceed the hours in your day. You get emails and calls from me with requests, questions, and decisions you have to make. But what is in my job description also applies to you. You are bright shining lights. Keep your tank filled and stay burning.

So, thank you that you want devotion to the inner spiritual life to be tops on my list. But I want to turn this around. Is it number one on yours? How important are prayer and study and spiritual disciplines to your life? By no means are these the work simply of the pastor. We know that intellectually. But how's it working for you? You have busy lives. Two kids who wake up late and needy. A job, responsibilities at home with children, or aging parents; exams to give and take; businesses to run; church responsibilities to fulfill. I'm reminded of the old guy who prayed every morning for two hours. Someone said, “I'm too busy to do that.” His response: “I'm too busy not to.”

It's a lesson I learned the hard way on the side of the road one time; okay, twice: when your needle points to ‘E,’ you going to run out of gas. I know what it means to run dry and you do, too. Your kids won't go to bed and so wrestle and squirm the already busy evening out of you and then wake up too early screaming for you again. And you turn into Godzilla right there in the bedroom. When you've finished ranting, your kid looks up and says, “Let me guess; you're out of oil.” When the needle hits ‘E,’ you are going to run out of gas. When you haven't had a conversation with your spouse about anything but carpool schedules and bills to pay in three weeks, your marriage is running on dry. When you have been in the same room with your children without giving them your full attention for too long, you will lose those moments that are passing. When you've worked eighty-hour weeks

longer than you can remember, your health will suffer. If you eat junk food for twenty years, your body is going to know it. When you haven't put the brakes on, stopped, and gotten alone and serious with God, your spiritual tank will run dry. And that's the tank that fuels everything else in life.

At DaySpring, we hold the ordering virtues of simplicity and sacredness for our corporate life in hopes that the way we live our lives together will form and discipline our imagination and commitments for how we live our lives apart. What we are saying is that the insignificant, less obvious things are really the things that matter—time with your kids and spouse, grace to the brokenhearted, significant time spent in prayer, reading scripture slowly. Living life full to overflowing with the Spirit of God, so that when you do encounter Jesus in the glory of the last days, or in the face of the least of these today, you are ready to meet him and shine for him.

Now may you go, read scripture slowly, pray deeply, know God fully, and be filled with fuel that will keep your light shining through whatever long, dark night may lie ahead. Until Jesus comes.

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