

# The Second Baptist Pulpit

**“Used Up or Filled Up?”  
November 16, 2008  
Matthew 25:1-13  
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A wedding was a great occasion. The whole village turned out to accompany the couple to their new home, and they went home by the longest possible road, so that they might prolong the celebration. There's an old Jewish saying that "everyone from six to sixty will follow the marriage drum." Rabbis agreed that a man might even abandon his studies of the law to share in the celebration of a wedding.

In Jesus' day many young women made their living by acting as "ladies in waiting"—bridesmaids. It was their job to accompany the groom into the banquet, giving it an air of celebration and festivity.

For these women, who may or may not have been friends of the ones getting married, at the very least it meant a little income and a good meal.

They brought their lamps, lit them, and waited along the road for the groom to pass by. And they waited and waited. Evidently he was delayed—he couldn't find his cufflinks or one of the groomsmen forgot to pick up his shoes at Al's Formal Wear or something happened, and the groom was delayed.

And as they waited, they fell asleep with their lamps still burning. Eventually someone saw the groom coming and woke the ladies up. Much to their dismay they realized that while they slept their lamps had gotten low on oil or gone out entirely.

No problem—for five them. Five of the bridesmaids had come well prepared with extra oil. They refilled their lamps, trimmed the wicks, and were ready to go to the marriage feast.

The other five were not so well prepared. They hadn't brought any extra oil! They asked the five who had extra if they could borrow some, but they refused to share. There was nothing for them to do but run to the store to get some more. By the time

they got back the party had already started, and their services weren't needed anymore. The doors had been shut to the banquet, and they were left outside.

This is not my favorite parable or the easiest one to understand. In fact, I'm glad this isn't the only parable about the Kingdom of God. There are lots of other descriptions of the Kingdom in the gospels that do not involve bridesmaids and oil, refusing to share, and doors that lock half of us out just because we were a little late.

What if you took this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids and merged it with some of the other things Jesus said? You might get some strange results.

*(Matthew 6:25ff) Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Worry about your oil; that's the main thing. Worry about whether you have enough for you, and forget about everyone else; they are not your problem.*

Or (Matthew 7:7ff) *Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you, unless of course you're late and the bridegroom answers, in which case, you might as well forget it.*

Or (Matthew 7:12ff) *In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you. In everything, that is, except oil, which changes all the rules. Don't share your oil with your friends.*

I don't know. If taking care of yourself were the main message of the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes would never have happened. Jesus wouldn't have lifted a finger for that hungry crowd, not if they hadn't packed their own picnic lunch. Instead of "The Feeding of the Five Thousand," we would have "The Moral of the Very Few Who Came Prepared."

*[Anna Carter Florence, "Filling Stations," November 4, 2007, [www.day1.net](http://www.day1.net)]*

So what is this parable about?

What it's about is, when the time comes, are you going to

be filled up and ready to go or used up and not ready for anything? Are you being filled up or used up?

Are you adding to your inner resources or are you depleting them?

Anna Carter Florence teaches at Columbia Seminary in Georgia, and she says that they give a lecture to the students about the spiritual life of the preacher. And one time during this lecture, they brought an oil lamp, the kind with a wick and real oil in the bottom, as a visual aid.

They talked about how the role of the pastor, or the role of a Christian, for that matter, is to be a light for others—"the light of the world." Then they 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.

So they 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 they 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 little “in case of emergency” speech we hear on airplanes—how to fasten your seat belt and where the exits are. And then there's always this: *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.*

It's kind of a funny thing to say, but it's true. If you don't take care of yourself, you're not going to be able to take care of the person next to you who's depending on you.

Listen to what Anna Carter Florence says about all this: *I am not a pastor in a church,*

*at the moment; but I am a mother and a spouse and a teacher and a friend. I am a Christian, and I know what it means to run out of oil, and I'm guessing you do, too. Your kid walks into the kitchen at 5:30 and says, "What's for dinner?" and you say, "Meatloaf," and your kid says, "What, again?" And suddenly you have morphed into Godzilla, right there in the kitchen; and when you have finished ranting your kid looks at you calmly and says, "Let me guess. You're out of oil."*

*It's fairly simple.*

*When the arrow on the gas tank points to empty, you are going to run out of gas.*

*If a two-year-old doesn't get a nap, she is going to crash.*

*When you haven't had a conversation with your spouse in three weeks that hasn't revolved around carpooling logistics, your marriage is getting dry.*

*If you have worked eighty-hour weeks for longer than you care to know, your relationships are going to suffer.*

*It's not really something any of us can avoid. There are some kinds of fuel that just*

*are not negotiable; and if you eat junk food for twenty years, your body is going to let you know about it.*

When the time comes, are you going to be filled up and ready to go or used up and not ready for anything?

And here's the other thing: *you* have to be responsible for seeing that you're filled up, because there are some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else.

Remember in Jesus' parable, the five foolish bridesmaids, the ones who weren't prepared, asked the ones who were prepared if they could borrow some of their oil. And they responded, *No, you'll have to go buy some for yourself.*

It wasn't that the wise bridesmaids were selfish or mean. They just knew how it works. When it comes down to ultimate questions of life, there's no more looking to other people to help you out. You are responsible for yourself.

There are some kinds of preparation we can only do for ourselves. There are

some reserves that no one else can build up. You have to figure out what fills you up spiritually and make sure you are filling up and not using up.

No one can purchase it for you or lend it to you or turn it over to you. This is not something where you can copy somebody else's answers.

I performed a funeral on Friday, and as I was talking to the family about the funeral service, it turns out that years ago they had had a bad experience with their father's funeral. The preacher had preached a super aggressive evangelistic sermon that went on, they said, for about half an hour.

They wanted to make sure that I wouldn't do something like that. I assured them, *You don't have to worry about that.*

But we've all been at funerals like that. I know I was at a funeral one time where the preacher never even mentioned the name of the person who had died in his sermon, never offered a word of com-

fort to the family. But he spent thirty minutes going over the plan of salvation, having us bow our heads and close our eyes, repeat his prayer, raise our hands if we made a decision.

And he was saying, *I see that hand. Thank you. Yes, I see that hand.* Even though there were no hands being raised (yes, I peeked). That's just part of the shtick. I literally had to get up and go outside. I couldn't take it anymore.

Thinking about that and about today's parable from Jesus, I remembered something that William Willimon said one time. Willimon who is now the Methodist Bishop in Birmingham, told about how when he was a young pastor in rural Georgia, a dear uncle of one of his congregation's members died suddenly, and though this uncle was not a member of Willimon's church, he and his wife decided to attend the funeral.

So Willimon and his wife drove to a back-woods independent Baptist church for the funeral one sunny afternoon. It was, Willimon said, unlike anything he had ever

seen. They wheeled the casket in and soon thereafter the pastor began to preach.

With great fire and flailing his arms all over the place, this preacher thundered, *It's too late for Joe! He might have wanted to do this or that in his life, but it's too late for him now! He's dead. It's all over. He might have wanted to straighten out his life, but he can't now. It's finished!*

As Willimon sat there, he thought to himself, *Well, this is certainly a great comfort for this grieving family!*

The minister continued: *But it ain't too late for you! People drop dead every day, so why wait?! Make your life count, wake up and come to Jesus now!*

*Well, Willimon concluded, it was the worst thing I ever heard. "Can you imagine a preacher doing that to a bereft family?" he asked his wife in the car on the way home. I've never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate! I would never preach a sermon like that.*

His wife agreed: it was tacky, calloused, manipulative. *And of course*, his wife added, *the worst part of it all is that what he said was true.*

It's too late for Joe. So, you, don't wait. Make your life count. Wake up and come to Jesus now.

It may be a little tacky. It may be a little unsophisticated. It may be a little embarrassing.

But there is a sense in which that is the message of Jesus' parable today.

Because here's the thing: you will run out. Time will run out. And I'm not just talking about death or funerals here. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze, we all put it off, saying, One of these days...

One of these days I'm going to start making deposits instead of just withdrawals. One of these days. We all doze. We all put it off.

And then the shout goes up: *He's coming!* It's time. And one of these days is today, and it's over, and you never did bring your flask of oil.

Anna Carter Florence says that's one of the hardest things about this parable. The time will come when you have to draw on the oil you have, right there, on your person, in your flask. And it can't be borrowed from somebody else. If you don't have any, you don't have any. And it isn't going to come from your investment savings, and it isn't going to come from your good intentions and your long range plans; it's going to come from the deposits you have (or have not) been making right now.

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