A WIDOWS OIL

In a certain mountain village in Europe several centuries ago, a nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. At last he decided to build them a church. No one saw the complete plans for the church until it was finished. When the people gathered, they marvelled at its beauty and completeness. Then someone asked, "But where are the lamps? How will it be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls. Then he gave to each family a lamp which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship. "Each time you are here the area where you are seated will be lighted," the nobleman said. "Each time you are not here, that area will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark."

Today we are starting a new series. For the next 6 weeks we are going to be looking at stories from the lives of Old Testament prophets. Today I want to start by looking at my favourite, the prophet Elisha.

2 Kings 4:1 The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves." 2 Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" "Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil." 3 Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. 4 Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side." 5 She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. 6 When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing. 7 She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

During an interview, Bud Wilkinson, coach of a number one college football team, was asked "What contribution does professional sports make to the physical fitness of Americans?" His answer was unsurprisingly "very little." He added, "A professional football game is happening where 50,000 spectators, desperately needing exercise, sit in the stands watching 22 men on the field desperately needing rest!" The church should not be like this.

"A Christian who does not have a ministry is a contradiction of terms" - John MacArthur

Jesus is building His church and He is looking for men and women who will join with him in the construction. Perhaps you are thinking to yourself "what part do I play in building the church? What can I bring to help?" You can bring 3 things:

1. Bring what you have (vs. 1-2) -

This widow had been the wife of a prophet who had died. She had reached the end of her rope and had nothing left. She was so poor her sons were being sold into slavery. She cried out to Elisha and he asked what she had in the house. Isn't that a little strange? Instead of asking what she WANTED he asked what she HAD. He then took what she had and multiplied it.

This is how the Lord often works in our lives. Sometimes we can come to him and ask Him to make us something which we are not. We ask to be another Billy Graham or Hudson Taylor. He asks us to give what we already have so that He can multiply it and use it for the kingdom.

E.g. Feeding the 5000. David and Goliath. Moses and his staff. What do you have to offer the Lord? What has God already given you that you can give to him to multiply for His service?

Everyone excels in something in which another fails. -- Latin Proverb

The problem with the church is that, "few of us really know our strengths. The great teachers, and great leaders, recognize their strengths and focus on them." -- Peter Drucker

A man was sitting on his porch in the Southern USA. He recently retired from the post office, and he's sitting there when his first Social Security check is delivered. He's very, very discouraged. He thinks to himself, "Is this what life is going to be from now on--sitting on the porch waiting for my check to arrive?" He decided he wouldn't settle for that, and so he made a list of all of the things he had going for him all the blessings and the capacities, the unique things that were in him. The list was long because he listed everything he could think of and in the list was the fact that he was the only person on earth who knew his mother's recipe for fried chicken. It used eleven different herbs and spices. So he went to a nearby restaurant and asked if he could cook the chicken, and they said yes. It soon became the most popular item on the menu. So he opened his own restaurant, and then others, and a string of restaurants. Eventually Harland Sanders sold the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise across all of America. He finally retired a second time (all this happened, you remember, after he had retired from the postal service), and he continued in the service of the company as a public relations representative for a quarter of a million dollars a year till his death.

Perhaps you are thinking that what you have is so small and insignificant. Remember that God can use anything or anyone to accomplish His purposes. History is full of ordinary people who did extraordinary things for God because they used what they had been given. What talent or experiences do you have that God can use? Do you know your spiritual gift – if not then you need to find out what that is.

2. Bring what is Available (vs. 3) –

There was enough oil to fill either 5 or 5000 jars. The quantity of oil received was not based on the miracle but on the availability of the jars. It was not the jars present but the jars available that were important. This is what determined the quantity of oil received, not God.

The effectiveness of ministry in the church is not based on God's ability. God has given us his Spirit and the gifts we need to be a light in the world. He has given us His word which is the power of salvation for everyone who believes. Unfortunately there are far too many one jar Christians in the church today.

There was once a wise old man that lived in the mountains. People from all the surrounding villages would go to the old man with their questions and he would always answer them wisely. In one village there was a young boy who was jealous of the old man, so he devised a way to trick him and make him look foolish. He would take a small bird up the mountain in his hands and then ask the wise old man what he was carrying. If he was correct in saying that it was a small bird then he would ask if the bird was living or dead. If the wise old man said 'dead' he would release the bird and let it fly away. If the wise old man said 'living' then he would squeeze the bird to death and show everyone it was dead. Either way, the wise old man would be wrong.

He caught a small bird and carried it in his hands up the mountain to visit the wise old man. With many people visiting, he approached the wise old man and asked him "Wise old man, what do I have in my hands." He replied, "A small bird." "You are right in saying this" replied the youth "but tell me this, is the bird living or dead." The wise old man smiled, placed his hand on the youth's shoulder and said "the answer to that question my son lies within your hands."

Often we are not available because we are so busy. A brand new lawyer in his brand new office on his first day in practice sees a prospective client walk in the door. He decides he should look busy, so he picks up the phone and starts talking: "Look, Harry, about that amalgamation deal. I think I better run down to the factory and handle it personally. Yes. No. I don't think 3 million will swing it. We better have Rogers from Seattle meet us there. OK. Look, I have to go, call you back later." He looks up at the visitor and says, "Good morning, how may I help you?" And the prospective client says, "You can't help me at all. I'm just here to hook up your phone."

In the busyness of our Christian life it is easy to become so pre-occupied with other things that we become unavailable to be used by God. We can look busy but not really be hooked into Christ and His will for our lives. In order to be filled you must first be available. God often does not move through the most educated or gifted person but through the most available person He can find. Through the one who says, "Here am I Lord, use me". Make yourself available to God and He will use you.

3. Bring what is Empty (vs. 4) -

The jars which the widow brought needed to be not just available but also empty. Jars that were full of something else would have been of little use. You cannot fill an already full thing.

When Jesus gave His sermon on the mount He began with "Blessed are the poor in Spirit". That is because emptiness is the starting place for filling. In addition to making ourselves available to God we must also must be filled with His Spirit. To fully use and flow in the gifts that God has given we must hand over the control of our life to God.

Eph 5:17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is looking for people who are "under the influence". Whose mind, heart and will is controlled by His Spirit. In the Greek verb "Be Filled" is interesting:

a. It is imperative (a command). This is a non negotiable. It is God's plan for your life. It is not something just for a group of "charismatics" - it is for everyone!

b. It is passive. It is not something you do but something that is done to you. God is the one who fills - you simply receive. It is not taking more from God but allowing God to have more of you. You received all of the Holy Spirit when you came to Christ. Now you need to allow that Spirit to have free reign in your life.

c. It is present. It is not something that happened once but something that is continuous. It requires constant attention (every day). The reason for this is that there is constant depletion. No matter how much you eat today you will be hungry tomorrow. No matter how much gas you put in your car, if you drive it eventually it will need more. No matter how much you are filled in a service you have to be filled again - sometimes even before you get to the parking lot. You constantly need to be filled because you are constantly being pulled back into the flesh. Moody was once asked by a woman why he always preached on being filled and why one filling was not enough. He replied "Because Madam, I leak". The more you "leak" the more and more frequently you need to fill.

When you give God control in your life He moves in and starts to change things. Priorities and attitudes change.

You have your gifts not so much for your own sake as for the sake of others. You are like an apple tree that produces fruit not for its own consumption but for the consumption of others. Your gifts are given so you can bless others by ministering to them. If you have the gift of teaching, you have it so others in the body will be taught. If you have the gift of hospitality, it is because others need the gracious welcome they receive from you. If even one gifted person fails to function, the body of Christ is deprived of a ministry it needs to function well.

Do you want to be used by God? It means identifying what the Lord has already given you in Christ. It means opening your life and making yourself available to God. It means giving over the control of your life and asking Jesus to use you. It begins with a prayer – "Lord Jesus Christ you can have all of me. I will do anything you ask of me, go anywhere you direct me, give anything you request of me, anytime."

Does a life lived wholeheartedly for Christ really make a difference? You bet!

Back in 1886 there was a sobbing little girl named Hattie May Wiatt who stood near a small church from which she had been turned away because it was too crowded. "I can't go to Sunday School," she sobbed to the pastor as he walked by. Seeing her shabby, unkempt appearance, the pastor taking her by the hand, took her inside and found a place for her in the Sunday School class. The child was so touched that she went to bed that night praying and thinking of the children who had no place to learn about Jesus. Some two years later she died in a poor tenement buildings and the parents called for the kind-hearted pastor, who had befriended their daughter, to handle the final arrangements. As her poor little body was being moved, a worn and crumpled red purse was found clenched in her hand. Inside was found 57 cents and a note scribbled in childish handwriting, which read, "This is to help build the little church bigger so MORE children can go to Sunday school." For two years she had saved for this offering of love. When the pastor tearfully read that note, he knew instantly what he would do. Carrying this note and the cracked, red purse to the pulpit, he told the story of her unselfish love and devotion. He ask the congregation if anyone would like to buy one of those pennies that Hattie May had saved and that Sunday he raised over $250, which was a lot of money back then. With the money they bought the house next door and expanded the church. People heard the story about the child who had died and her 57 cents and soon a local newspaper published it. Within a few years they had enough money to buy a new large parcel of land near the church.

Today that small seed of faith has grown into a mighty tree. When you are in the city of Philadelphia, look up Temple Baptist Church, with a seating capacity of over 3000.

Next to it is Temple University, where hundreds of students are trained. Have a look, too, at the Good Samaritan Hospital and at a Sunday School building which houses hundreds every Sunday morning, so that no child in the area will ever need to be left outside at Sunday school time. In the main hall of this building you will find the picture of the sweet faced little girl whose 57 cents, so sacrificially saved, made such remarkable history.