

Getting to the end of ourselves: Empty to be Filled

This week I read a story about a young woman whose husband recently died and she was left to raise their two sons alone. Her husband had been a godly man that many people admired. But when he died he left her with a very large amount of debt and no life insurance.

The woman had no real way to work, and her sons were still very young, so she found herself on the verge of being put out on the street virtually overnight. In the village where she lived money was tight for everybody, so creditors usually didn't show much mercy to people who owed them money. It was quite possible that the widow would have to sell her two sons into slavery until the mortgage on her house was paid. In her culture that kind of thing happened all the time.

As you might expect, she cried until she couldn't cry anymore and desperation was setting in. She was at the end of herself and down to one not-so-promising idea. She went to visit a man who had worked with her husband. They had a good relationship and she thought he might feel some sense of loyalty and help her find some kind of financial solution.

She explained that she had no money and could no longer pay her bills and if she didn't come up with some money fast, she would lose the house or her sons would become slaves to her creditor. If that happened she may never see her sons again and she may end up on the streets begging for money, or worse.

The man asked her what seemed like an odd question. He asked her what she had left in the house. She wondered if he was asking for some kind of payment too, but she replied, there is "nothing in the house but a jar of oil." (2 Kgs.4:2)

The man told her to go to all of her neighbors and borrow all the empty jars they could spare. He told her to bring all the empty jars into her house, then get her jar of oil and begin pouring it into the jars until each jar is full. The man told her that she could sell the oil to pay off her debts and have money left over to live on.

You may recognize this story from 2 Kings 4. The man who advised the woman was Elisha the prophet. This story illustrates, among other things; **that God loves to fill empty things.** In this instance it was jars.

Observations about jars:

- All jars start out empty
- Jars are made for filling
- Jars don't fill themselves, but they receive what is poured into them

It is pretty much the same with us. As newborns we start out empty, but as we progress through life we are filled by others and by experiences. And like jars, we are made for filling. The proof of this is seen in people who feel an emptiness in their life. And like jars, we can't fill ourselves. We receive what is poured into us.

The difference between people and jars is that we don't typically see ourselves as being empty. The measure of filling we receive is in direct proportion to our level of emptiness.

It is only when we get to the end of ourselves that we recognize our emptiness.

Sometimes life has a way of bringing us to our knees and forcing us to see our emptiness.

- loved one dies
- loss of health
- loss of job, then maybe some of our possessions –house, cars, etc
- natural disaster –fire, tornado, hurricane

It could be a thousand other things, but at some point we're faced with the reality that we have no power to change our circumstances and we're at the mercy of others. In these situations we may feel a host of emotions, from fear to vulnerability, loneliness, anger, resentment, despair.

What if these things occur to provide an opportunity for us to see the truth and light that emanates from God? If our perspective is right when we recognize our emptiness we are in position to be filled in the most wonderful way. Hold that thought.

At the other end of the pendulum is where we find ourselves most often. Our perception about life is that everything is hunky dory. We go, almost in a run, from one activity to another and talk about how good life is and call ourselves blessed.

But what if some of our busyness is counterproductive to the purpose of God?

I'm not saying that it is wrong to have a good job, nice things, and a busy life. I'm just wondering what are we doing that is really significant. In 10-20 yrs will the things we are doing now be important?

What we need to consider is that **there is a difference between a jar that is full and a jar that is filled.** On the surface it might seem like there is no difference, when in reality there is a vast difference between the two.

Jesus illustrated this idea for us during His earthly ministry.

Jn. 2 His first public miracle: changed water to wine

- wedding parties typically carefully planned
- the host is told the wine is almost gone
 - unforgivable social blunder
- in that culture weddings were usually 7 day events & wine was supposed to last
 - running out would have exposed the host to public ridicule

Do you see what is happening here? **This story was about empty jars.**

Jesus comes on the scene and tells the servants to fill 6 waterpots with water up to the brim. Then He changes the water to wine, but John is careful to tell us that it isn't just any wine, but the best wine. The host is commended for saving the best wine for last, a rarity for such occasions. What Jesus does saves the host from public humiliation.

Jesus doesn't just fill emptiness; He fills it with the best possible quality and with abundance, which produces joy.

Jn. 4

Jesus finds a woman by a well who has come **to fill empty water pots**, but He takes the time to engage her in conversation in order to help her see that **her life is empty. Then He fills it.** There's a difference between a life that is full and a life that is filled. Her life was full of activity, but her life wasn't filled until Jesus was in it.

Jn. 6

A large crowd is following Jesus because of the miracles He was performing and it was time for the Passover feast. He feeds more than 5,000 people with only five loaves of bread & two small fish. The people were so stunned by this that they wanted to “...take Him by force to make Him king...” vs.15.

Does this mean they liked being filled with the food He provided and wanted Him to keep doing it? It sure sounds like it, especially when you hear what Jesus tells them the next day.

Jn.6:26-27

Jesus tells them they must be more concerned about being filled than being full.

- To be full of bread is temporary
- To be filled with the living bread from Heaven is eternal (vs.51)

This idea is repeated over and over in the Scriptures: Jesus fills. And the same thing happens each time. Some people only want to be full, and some want to be filled. Those who want to be full think they can fill themselves. And those who want to be filled recognize their emptiness.

Don't underestimate the difficulty of recognizing your own emptiness. Emptying yourself is never painless, and not everyone is willing to go there. But if you are willing to get to the end of yourself Jesus is eager and willing to fill your emptiness.

Let's turn to Luke 14 and notice an example from Jesus

Jesus was invited to eat at a Pharisees' house on the Sabbath day, and He was being watched closely. (afraid he'd still the silverware or take a plate home)
A sick man came to the house and Jesus heals him. Figuratively, this man's life was an empty jar because of his sickness and Jesus fills his jar.

As this situation unfolded Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking, so before He healed the man, Jesus asked “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

There was no response. This should have been a happy moment and a time to celebrate with the man who was healed.

Jesus then asked if any of them would allow their animal to go un-rescued if it fell into a pit on the Sabbath day. Again, there was no response.

It's obvious that **their preconceptions about Jesus** led them to believe that He has to be the enemy, no matter what He teaches or how many miracles He performs. These people were literally an arm length away from God in the flesh, but they couldn't get past the fact that He healed on the wrong day.

Now, from their perspective they were religiously right and they were doing God's will. **Their problem was that they were full, but not filled.** They were full of legalism and tradition to the neglect of compassion and mercy. They had no interest in His teaching because they couldn't see their own emptiness.

I wish I could say it was just a problem for the Pharisees, but there are still many people who can't see their own emptiness. To the Pharisees and to us if we are like them, Jesus continues the teaching with two parables.

In the first parable, Jesus says if you are invited to a wedding feast, don't be arrogant and sit in one of the best seats at the feast. Sit near the back and if you are moved up let the host move you up. In other words, don't fill your own jar, let others fill it for you. Be humble.

In the second parable, Jesus teaches about a great banquet: **Lk.14:15-24**

In the Bible a banquet is more than just a meal. It is a metaphor for how God addresses the deepest needs of man. Several of the parables involve banquets to symbolize the Master feeding His people, giving them not only food, but the very best food. **Perhaps it is to teach us the difference between being full and being filled.**

A man sends out invitations to his feast and the food is prepared, but when the servant calls them no one wants to come. People offer their reasons about why they can't come to the feast. The master doesn't like excuses, so he sends his

servant back out to invite the less fortunate to his feast. Then he declares that those who rejected his invitation will not taste any of his food.

In the parable the master represents God and the servant represents Jesus. The three people who make excuses represent mankind.

The first person is someone who is preoccupied with their possessions. This is the guy who:

- thinks he owns property, but it owns him.
- Just bought/built a house and spends all his time making improvements
- Is always in pursuit of the next possession

“The presumption of emptiness is the fuel that runs a consumer-based economy.” In consumerism, we buy into the concept that our personal sense of fulfillment is directly related to our ever-increasing consumption of goods.

-in other words, if I feel a little down, I need to consume a little more.

-Retail therapy

-when I feel emptiness, it's just life telling me that my stuff needs to be upgraded

We need to realize that there's no end to the stuff. We can fill our houses, garages, and storage units and still feel empty. It's like eating a big meal and rubbing your belly and saying “I'm stuffed. I can't eat another bite”. Then someone says there is pie and you just have to get a piece. But even after the pie, you are full for a little while before looking for the next meal.

We cannot fill the emptiness of the soul with things that don't last.

“The spiritual poverty of the Western world is much greater than the physical poverty of our people in Calcutta. You in the West have millions of people who suffer such terrible loneliness and emptiness...These people are not hungry in the physical sense, but they are in another way. They know they need something more than money, yet they don't know what it is. What they are missing really is a living relationship with God.” Mother Teresa

The second person in the parable is preoccupied with being busy. These are people who have lives so jam-packed with activities that they can't find any time for Jesus.

In June 2012 the New York Times ran an article called "The Busy Trap". It makes the point that when asked "How are you doing?" the default answer is "busy". We roll our eyes and with a complaining tone of voice tell others how hectic life is, when in reality we're bragging about it. The article goes on to say:

"Busyness serves as a kind of hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day...We're busy because of our own ambition or drive or anxiety, because we're addicted to busyness and dread what we might have to face in its absence."

Did you know the average American spends about 1,000 hrs a year watching TV.

- If you live to be 65 that is almost 8 yrs of your life.

Did you know that many people spend about 5 hrs a day online via comp/phone

- That equals roughly 14 yrs of your life on the internet

It starts to sound like emptiness doesn't it? Let's talk about phones for a minute.

The International Data Corp found that 80% of smartphone users check their phones within the first 15 mins of waking up. And some people can't do anything without their phone. The New York Times published another article titled "The Rise of the Toilet Texter" stating that 1 in 4 Americans will not go to the bathroom without their phone.

Don't miss the point here. Our lives can become so busy that our minds are distracted away from the great banquet of God. When this happens we are tricked into thinking our lives are filled, when they are simply full of unimportant things.

The third person in the parable is preoccupied with building a relationship.

- This guy is the hardest one to criticize. You want to pat him on the back and tell him you understand. Go be with your wife.

How many songs and movies about love have been written? Nearly all of them have the same message: the right partner will fill the emptiness in your life.

That idea causes people to enter relationships with a false expectation — **that we'll be fulfilled by another human being.** I wonder how much this effects the divorce rate?

Gary Thomas wrote a book called "The Sacred Search" that uses the word picture of marriage as an hourglass. He says that when we get married the top of the hourglass is full and the sand begins to move slowly. Within 12-18 months we begin to experience feelings of discontent. When the last grain of sand hits the bottom of the hourglass we wonder what's wrong with the person we married — or with ourselves. Where did the infatuation go?

And...could there be someone else out there with a full hourglass who could fill our empty spaces?

Despite our tendency to applaud the guy who skips out on the banquet because he wants to build a relationship with his wife, **there is only one relationship that can fill us permanently.**

Conclusion

In the parable Jesus was talking about a great banquet to teach us that our lives are not meant to be full of meaningless things, they are meant to be filled with the provisions God provides.

Eph.5 is another text that could be used to teach us that life is to be lived with a spiritual focus. Let's take notice of **vs.18** for just a moment.

When Paul commands us to be filled with the Spirit I understand he uses the present passive imperative tense.

The tense is imperative, meaning it isn't an option, but a command.

The verb tense also tells us it's not a one-time event.

-just as we keep feeding our physical body, we must keep feeding our soul

The passive part of the tense means this is **not something we do to ourselves.**

-the jar doesn't fill itself, remember.

-someone else must do that

So, how do we, as jars, place ourselves in the right position to be filled with oil that never runs dry? We must first empty ourselves.

D.L. Moody said:

“...I believe many a man is praying to God to fill him when he is full already with something else. Before we pray that God will fill us, I believe we ought to pray that He would empty us. There must be an emptying before there can be a filling.”

Maybe you are ready to empty yourself today and let God fill you. Or maybe you already know Christ, but not closely enough. Remember, the measure of filling we receive is in direct proportion to the level of our emptiness.

Don't settle for the full life--go after the filled life. How sad it would be to starve to death just outside the door of the greatest feast in the universe, with the invitation clutched in your hand.

The master is calling you. Come to the feast and be filled!