

Lamps, Wicks, and Oil

By Dennis Pollock

I love lamps, candles, and lanterns. I enjoy the gentle light they provide – so much kinder and prettier than the harsh bulbs we normally use. I have become something of a collector of these ancient forms of lighting, and love to light a lamp or lantern in the evenings when I read the Psalms or Proverbs. I put on some soft piano music, light one of my favorite lamps, and spend a relaxing time in the Word of God.

The Bible uses the imagery of lamps and candles freely. In Revelation Jesus is described as the One "who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (Revelation 2:1). In Jesus' parable given to encourage us to always be prepared for His coming, He speaks of five wise virgins who kept oil in their lamps and five foolish who allowed the oil to run out. He tells us, "If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, **as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light**" (Luke 11:36). He says of John the baptist: "**He was the burning and shining lamp**, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light" (John 5:35). John writes about Jesus: "**In Him was life, and the life was the light of men**" (John 1:4).

Recently I learned an important spiritual lesson from one of our lamps. One of my all-time favorite lamps was not performing very well. It refused to burn brightly for any length of time. No matter how high I turned the wick, I couldn't get a steady flame. The fire would blaze up briefly and within a few minutes be reduced to almost nothing. Not having all that much experience with lamps I guessed that the wick was faulty. My wife Benedicta set me straight. Ben is from Nigeria where they know a thing or two about oil lamps, since electricity is often only available for a couple of hours a day. She told me that the wick was just fine; the problem was the oil. A poor grade of oil (actually a mixture of two different lamp oils) was barely making its way through the wick. As a result of too much viscosity, there was just enough oil to keep a tiny flame, but the thing that was mostly burning was the wick, not the oil.

We changed the oil and the problem was solved. Now the oil was flowing freely through the wick; now it was the oil doing most of the burning and not the wick. The wick was just providing a means of transfer to get the oil from the bottom of the lamp to the top, where it could burn. I was a happy guy – my favorite lamp was doing its thing once again.

As I thought about all this I realized that this was a nearly perfect illustration of how we who are in Christ are to relate to the Holy Spirit. (We preachers are always finding illustrations in the strangest places!) I saw that the lamp was totally dysfunctional when it was the wick doing the most of the burning. Although to an untrained eye, it does appear that it is the wick doing the burning, in truth it is supposed to be the oil. Try to burn a wick without a steady supply of oil and the wick will last but a few minutes. But when the wick is doing what it should – slurping up the oil and being a good conduit for it, the lamp can burn for hours without a problem. The oil can last a whole lot longer than a flimsy cotton wick!

In Jesus Christ we are the wicks and the oil is the Holy Spirit. **It is not our job to burn!** We will soon burn up and burn out if we try to be the fuel! It is our job to be filled with the Holy Spirit and serve as a conduit for His presence and power, which is infinite and will never burn out. This imagery is clearly seen in the Old Testament story of Moses and the burning bush. After 40 years in solitude as he

learned the ways of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses was ready for graduation. As he spent another quiet day with the sheep he saw something unusual – a bush was burning, but in spite of the blazing flame the bush was not being consumed. Of course this was God's way of getting Moses' attention, but why this particular symbol? Why not a dancing rock, a singing sheep, or a cloud in the shape of an angel? It would seem that even in those days God was already prefiguring what His Son Jesus Christ would do for us. He was giving Moses a glimpse of the Spirit-filled life, a life of tremendous power and energy, which keeps us fresh and flourishing and does not consume us.

To be a good lamp you don't have to be pretty or impressive or fancy. When things get dark, if you are doing your job well it will be the light that others notice, not your fancy carvings or delicate artwork. Effective lamps need only two things. First is a porous wick. Wicks use a capillary action to draw the oil up to the top of the lamp where burning can take place. Wicks are never made out of plastic or steel or glass. Wicks are always some type of soft material that can boast one major attribute: it can transfer oil exceedingly well.

Secondly effective lamps need a good source of oil, the purer the better. Anything you mix with oil will always degrade it. When it comes to oil, mixture is bad, purity is good. So in Jesus Christ it is our responsibility to be yielded wicks, sensitive to the Holy Spirit, allowing Him perfect freedom in our lives, families, and ministries. The more carnality, worldly passions, and unprofitable obsessions we allow to mix with the presence of God in our lives, the weaker will be our light, and the sooner we will burn up and burn out.

God is big on purity. Mixture is almost always spoken of negatively in the Bible. God told the Israelites not to plant two different kinds of seed in their vineyards, nor to plow with an ox and donkey yoked together. They were not to wear garments made of two different kinds of fabric such as wool and linen. And when it was time for young people to be married they were strictly forbidden to marry anyone outside of their own people.

Under the New Covenant we have freedom to wear shirts made of cotton and linen, or to plant two types of corn seeds in the same garden. But the idea of purity is still very big in the eyes of God. Jesus tells us, "**Blessed are the pure in heart**, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Paul writes that the purpose of God's commandment is love that comes **from a pure heart** (1 Timothy 1:5), and that we should hold the mystery of the faith **with a pure conscience** (1 Timothy 3:9). The definition of pure is pretty simple – it means unmixed. Milk that comes straight from the cow is pure, mix it with water, add vitamins and preservatives and it is no longer pure. Purity is not destroyed by taking away; it is spoiled by adding to.

In our walk with God, purity of heart and conscience are the result of a life completely devoted to Christ. Such a believer guards the will and work of Christ jealously; no passions or obsessions are allowed to rob the purity of their devotion. In 2 Corinthians Paul is concerned for the Corinthian believers, who seem to be turning away from a simple faith in Christ in their desire to be wise and esoteric. He warns them: "But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray **from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ**" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Purity can be destroyed by many additions, some appearing relatively harmless and others clearly evil. It could be pornography, but it might simply be an obsession with sports that robs us of all our free time. It might be an affair or it might be an addiction to television programs that drains us of our best hours while God's word is neglected and ignored. Whatever the case the result will be the same: our spiritual oil becomes congealed and cannot flow easily. We talk about the fullness of the Spirit but our

life is sadly deficient in this area. We may be saved, the oil may be present, but it stays in the bottom of the lamp, never making it to the top where it can blaze and burn, and bring blessing to others.

There is yet one more necessary factor for a lamp to do its job well. Not only must we be a porous wick and make sure our oil stays pure, we must also have a lampstand. The lamps of Jesus' day were tiny little things. They were not at all like most of us imagine a lamp to be. They were made of clay and provided a container for a tiny amount of olive oil with a hole on the end where the wick could rise slightly above the oil and burn. They provided just enough light to enable one to see shadowy figures. And one thing they must have to even provide that much light was a lampstand. If they were to do any good they must get above the floor level. Jesus addressed this, saying: "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. **Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand**, and it gives light to all who are in the house" (Matthew 5:14,15).

It would be foolish to light a lamp and then set it in a closet, or place it in the refrigerator. Lamps must be given the best possible positioning so that they can shine maximum light. This is where the lampstand comes in. As its name implies it is a stand with a base at the top large enough to comfortably hold the lamp. The stand enables the lamp to be as effective as possible, to give off as much light as the lamp is able to give.

It is not the job of the lamp to somehow jump onto the lampstand. Lamps are incapable of jumping or hopping. If they are not placed on their stands they will never get there. In a similar manner it is God who places us in a position for our light to do the most good for this world. It may be placing us in the position as a Sunday School teacher, a church elder or a pastor, or knitting our hearts to an evangelistic ministry where we can support them and share in their fruit. It may be an open door to get our articles or books published, or an opportunity to help out at a homeless shelter. Somehow, some way God will find stands for the lamps He lights. It is not for us to demand a particular stand or to complain if our stand is not as pretty as someone else's stand. God is very creative and the stands He fashions will be perfectly appropriate for their designated lamps. When He lights a lamp you can be sure He will provide the best possible stand for the most possible light. And it is His job to place us upon our stands. It is our job to trust Him to do this for us, and to accept the stand He provides.

The lesson here is simple but powerful. If you want to be fruitful and continually refreshed, it is not complicated. Abide in Jesus Christ, keep your devotion to Christ pure, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and become that burning bush whose leaves are always green. There is no shortage of fuel. The Spirit's power and energy are freely given to all who believe on Jesus Christ.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Bible tells us that the disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Tongues of fire appeared above every head. The power of this experience gave the apostles a visibility they could never have achieved through any efforts of their own. People from all over Jerusalem came together to see what was happening. Jesus' lamps had begun to burn.