

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

1 Samuel 16:13
Ephesians 1:13-14
2 Timothy 4:7-8
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SCRIPTURE

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward (1 Samuel 16:13 NRSV).

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13-14 NRSV).

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:7-8 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Plant or animal derived oil has been widely used in both ancient and modern times. The northern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean are and have been quite suitable for the cultivation of olive trees. So it is not surprising that olive oil played a major role in the economies and cultures of places like ancient Rome, Greece and Israel.

Sadly, not everyone likes olives.

A mother and her young daughter sit down at the table with a bowl of olives. The mother takes an olive, puts it in her mouth and goes, "Mmmmm." The daughter tries one for the first time, and goes "Ewww!" The mother eats another and, again, goes "Mmmmm." Her daughter tries yet another, then begins to cry. Her mother asks, "Why are you crying?" Her daughter says "It's not fair. You're getting all the good ones!"

In ancient Israel, olive oil had a practical use in cooking, medications, and cosmetics. In this sense it came to represent gladness or joy. But olive oil was also used in a theological sense as an anointing oil. Kings, priests and prophets were recognized in a ceremony that

involved pouring olive oil on the person's head. The oil represented God's Holy Spirit. For example, we read in 1 Samuel:

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward (1 Samuel 16:13).

When a king was anointed with oil it was like saying, "God's Holy Spirit has set this person apart to be our ruler." When a priest was anointed with oil it was like saying, "God's Holy Spirit has set this person apart to minister in the Tabernacle (or, later, the Temple)." Prophets were not always anointed with literal oil but their commission was seen as an anointing. It was like saying, "God's Holy Spirit has set this person apart to proclaim the Word of God."

The New Testament tells us that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. While describing how the Christian message began Peter says:

That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:37-38a NRSV).

This established a connection between anointing and baptism.

Peter had previously connected baptism with the Holy Spirit in his electric Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem:

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38 NRSV).

Paul would later speak of the seal of the Holy Spirit:

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Because oil was already associated with God's Holy Spirit it didn't take long before people started thinking of oil as the symbol for the seal of the Holy Spirit. In the ancient

world when a crate, or a package was shipped, it was marked with a seal, usually an impression made in wax or clay, in order to indicate from where it had come and to whom it belonged. The seal of the Holy Spirit refers to the idea that we belong to God and are to go where God sends us. The Holy Spirit both reveals God's will and gives us the strength to carry it out.

Paul knew that to live out the Christian life requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. More than once Paul drew from the world of sports to describe the experience. Nearing the end of his life he wrote:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

To be clear, Paul is not boasting that he has earned a reward from God. No one can do that. Rather, he dedicated his life to serving God in gratitude for the gift of right relations with God as accomplished by the death, resurrection, and promised return of Christ.

Paul says he “kept the faith.” Ancient Greek athletes made a vow to compete honorably and honestly. Paul says he has done the same thing with his life. Unfortunately, the keeping of vows has come on hard times. Long-range commitment is often replaced by short-range gratification. Ruth Graham was married to Billy Graham for 63 years. When asked if she'd ever considered divorcing her husband, Ruth is said to have answered, "Divorce, no, murder, yes!"

But clearly the life of faith can be a life of conflict. Perhaps that is why Paul repeatedly uses the image of a fighter. In 1 Corinthians he writes:

I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should (1 Corinthians 9:26-27 NLT).

Living in Corinth he would have seen the athletes at the Isthmian Games (second only in size and prestige to the Olympic Games). He would have observed that fighters prepared for a fight by covering themselves with olive oil. They did not do this to look pretty. They did it for protection. Blows that glanced to the side because of the slippery oil caused less damage. It was harder to hurt a protected fighter.

Here then the imagery is made complete. Anointing oil not only represents the seal of the Holy Spirit, it also represents the protection of the Holy Spirit as we are hit with the

various blows of life. To be sure, the Spirit does not promise to remove our difficulties but gives us the strength to go through them. The Spirit trains us for the contest of life.

Let me review what I have said so far. The Old Testament associates anointing oil with the Holy Spirit. The New Testament associates baptism with the Holy Spirit. It also speaks of the seal of the Holy Spirit and many consider olive oil to be a powerful symbol of this seal. The oil can also be a powerful symbol of the protection of the Holy Spirit.

Now because it was said that Jesus was anointed at the time of his baptism then at some point the early church began anointing people with oil at the time of their baptism. We know this was taking place at least by the 2nd century. Tertullian, a Christian scholar from that period, wrote about being anointed with oil after coming from what he called “the place of washing,” that is, baptism. Cyprian, a Christian leader from the 3rd century talked about the link between baptism and anointing.

Anointing with oil at baptism continued through the Middle Ages. But other things were added as well such as salt and pearls and much more. It became a complicated ordeal and a great deal of superstition arose around the various parts. The oil, for example, was thought to have magical power.

Sixteenth century reformers like John Calvin were dismayed at this complexity and confusion. In order to restore the meaning of baptism he favored simplicity. He said, in effect, “Just use water. If you are going to baptize someone just use water.” To this day most Protestant churches do not use anointing oil at baptism. This has certainly been the history of the Presbyterian Church, although, technically, it is not forbidden. Nevertheless, it is rare. But there are other uses for anointing oil. Most traditions, including Presbyterians, will use anointing oil for services of healing and renewal.

In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to renew for ourselves the meaning of baptism. This year we will use anointing oil to facilitate this. Upon those who are willing, the sign of the cross will be made in oil upon your forehead. You may be interested to know that the oil is imported from the Holy Land. It consists of olive oil together with myrrh, frankincense, and spikenard. (I bet you thought I was going to say “gold.”) Myrrh is a fragrant resin and was a key ingredient in the holy anointing oil mentioned in the Old Testament. Frankincense was burned in the Temple and represents prayer. Spikenard was used by the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet:

And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head (Mark 14:3 NKJV).

So you will have the opportunity to be anointed with a similar kind of oil that was used to anoint Jesus.

I have tried to make the case that there is an ancient and biblical link between anointing with oil and being baptized. There are rich metaphors here to encourage us in our walk with Christ. I have also tried to make it clear that neither the oil of anointing nor the water of baptism has any power in itself. The power belongs to God and comes to us by God's grace. Baptism points to the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Those who trust in Christ belong to God, are anointed with God's Holy Spirit, and are strengthened to fight the good fight.