

Sermon Notes

The Heart of Adoration in Contrast | Mark 14:1–11
Shaun Marksbury | Grace Bible Church
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I. Introduction

We have finished our look at Mark 13, the Olivet Discourse. We spent several weeks examining what that chapter had to say about the end-times, all of which are online if you want to listen to them again. Even so, as Mark now transitions us to a new scene, we also now move along.

The chapter opens with the announcement of the Passover, and we will spend a good portion of the rest of Mark in the near future on that day. After today, we'll read about the preparations for the Passover and the Last Supper in the Upper Room (vv. 12–25). From there, Peter will pledge his allegiance (vv. 26–31), Jesus will pray in Gethsemane (vv. 32–42), and Jesus will be arrested (vv. 43–52). The chapter will end with Jesus on trial (vv. 53–65) and Peter denying Christ (vv. 66–72). The opening hours of the Passover begin the final stretch of this book, and depending on how it goes, we will probably be done with Mark by summer.

For now, we are reading about events *before* the Passover. What may not be so clear in what we've read today is that this passage covers more than one day. While the first couple of verses pick up right after the Olivet Discourse, the other verses cover another day. We'll look at that as we move along.

For now, consider the people we encounter in these verses—the Sanhedrin, all those gathered at Simon's house, and, of course, Judas. They all have differing reactions to Jesus—all bad, except one. In this passage, we see the heart of true devotion contrasted to those around it.

II. The Heart of Abhorrence (vv. 1–2)

Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people."

You will remember that Passover is a feast to remember the angel of death "passing over" or sparing the children of Israel whose homes were covered by the blood (Ex 12:1–13:16). It's on a different day each year because it is based on the lunar calendar; the day is commemorated on the last day before the first full moon after the spring equinox (as such, Easter similarly drifts on the calendar). The Law commanded that it be celebrated in Jerusalem (cf. Dt 16:5–6). In vv. 12–16, we'll see Jesus's disciples preparing for the Passover meal—such preparations are to occur on the 14th of Nisan, and the meal was to be eaten on Nisan 15 (Lv 23:5–6).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the night of the Passover Seder and extending seven days (14:12; Ex. 12:15–20), from Nisan 15–21. All yeast or leaven was to be swept from the home, as it symbolized sin. Because this Feast began on Passover, the Passover meal is considered "the first day of Unleavened Bread" (cf. Mk 14:12). We'll talk more about these events next time.

While these events are approaching, the chief priests are planning something other than the worship of the people of God. They gather and conspire what to do about Jesus. The parallel, "Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him" (Mt 26:3–4). They sought a crafty and cunning way of capturing Him so they could kill Him. John 11:47–53 says,

Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, “What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.”

Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.

Still, they feared a riot, what they feared when they considered speaking against John the Baptist (11:32; cf. Lk 20:6) and when they wanted to arrest Jesus previously (12:12). We see that their main concern is maintaining control. Of course, with so many Jews visiting Jerusalem during the feast, possibly many of Christ’s supporters from Galilee, control would be more difficult.

Of course, Jesus already knew this. Back in 8:31, He “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” We saw that every time these leaders accost Jesus, He reveals their sinful commitment to reject Him.

So, what we’re seeing is their hearts. They loved the power and control they wielded, and they hated how Christ exposed them. When they have another emotion in v. 11, notice that it’s not Christ causing them gladness, but His betrayal. All who refuse to repent of their sins will ultimately come to the same point — hatred of the Son of God — and this same abhorrence will lead people to gnash their teeth at God in Hell. Sadly, these men demonstrate that some who know the most Scripture also hate the Lord with the greatest intensity. Such hatred stands in stark contrast to the heart of adoration that we encounter in the next verses:

III. The Heart of Adoration (vv. 3, 6, 8)

While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head.

This verse begins something called a Markan sandwich or incalation; Mark interrupts his telling of the chief priests’ plans to contrast this woman’s love and devotion toward Christ. This incident actually took place days earlier, probably on Saturday (Jn 12:3), and Mark is following Matthew’s example in this (Mt 26:6–13). That’s why in *One Perfect Life*, MacArthur places vv. 3–9 here at the beginning of the Passion Week, right after Mark 11:1a. Robert Thomas and Stanley Gundry do the same in their *A Harmony of the Gospels*.

So, rewinding before the Triumphal Entry, Jesus and His disciples are at the house of Simon the leper. This is a very subtle nod toward a miracle of Christ. The fact that Jesus and so many others are not only there, but also reclining (taking a meal) indicates that this is “Simon, the *former* leper.” Jesus healed a leper in 1:40–42, but there’s no indication whether this is the same man (see also Lk 17:11–19). Incidentally, only the God of Israel healed lepers (cf. 2 Kgs 5), and the chief priests knew this, but they still sought to kill Jesus.

Of course, Mark introduces us to a woman, but we’ve met her before. According to John 12:3, this was Mary, Martha’s sister. It seems that each time we see her, she’s at the feet of Jesus (Lk 10:38–42; Jn 11:31–32; 12:1–8).

What is she using for anointing? This perfume was an expensive import from India, manufactured from a plant grown in the Himalayas. It was stored in an alabaster vial, a whiteish gypsum container created from cave limestone deposits. Twelve ounces of the perfume would have been sealed in the jar (Jn 12:3), requiring the user to break it open for a single use. Its estimate price is “three hundred denarii” (v. 5), a little less than a year’s wages; Mark 6:37 estimates *two* hundred denarii could provide a meal for five thousand men (presumably plus women and children).

This is indeed an expensive gift, and Mary uses a “pure” or undiluted product on Jesus for the occasion. The Gospel of John records that she does more, anointing also His feet and wiping them with her hair, and comments that the whole house was filled with the fragrance (Jn 12:3). This extravagance partnered with her humility beautifully expresses her love for Jesus (cf. v. 6).

A very similar incident occurs in Lk 7:36–50, with Jesus being anointed by a woman in the house of a Simon. However, that involved a different Simon (a pharisee), a different woman (one of ill-repute, a harlot), and a different motivation for anointing Jesus (the forgiveness of her sins). Since it was customary to anoint a guest with oil, it’s likely Jesus received this treatment on numerous occasions; these simply stand out as memorable.

What made this incident memorable was her reasoning. She wasn’t simply following proper etiquette for guests (this isn’t even her house), nor was she whipped up into an emotional frenzy. She planned this for the purpose of anointing Him for His death. Finding the position at His feet a priority, it’s possible she understood at some level what Jesus had been teaching. Of course, she probably didn’t *fully* understand it, and no one ever fully understands the ways of God. Still, she certainly wasn’t pouring out such expensive perfume on a whim; this was an act of intentional worship.

So, we see a heart of love and forethought. She wanted to do something for Jesus, she thought about it, and she did what she could. This is nothing but pure adoration, and she demonstrates the kind of heart we should emulate. Of course, such an act would expose hearts not so attuned.

IV. The Heart of Anger (vv. 4–9)

In vv. 4–5, we will see one kind of heart. Even so, we will discuss two sets of hearts of anger or indignation. We will also see the corrective in vv. 6–9.

A. The Disciples’ Hearts Led Astray in Sin (vv. 4–5)

But some were indignantly remarking to one another, “Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they were scolding her.

First, we should note *who* started this. In the parallel, we read that Judas is the instigator of this discussion (Jn 12:4–5). Mary’s show of love created a moment of revulsion in this false convert, exposing the fact that he had no true love for Jesus. He, like the Pharisees and priests, had unrepentant sin, but being too cowardly to confront Jesus, he turns on this woman.

Judas saw it as a waste because his heart was already hard toward Christ, but he managed to whip up all the disciples into the outrage (Mt 26:8). It is almost as though, by using perfume, she herself somehow robbed food from the mouths of poor children! They may not realize that they have tacitly agreed with Judas, that this silly woman wasted her emotions on Jesus. However, they willfully got behind this public shaming.

Their hearts are angry because *they too* have unconfessed, unrepentant sin. Remember in 9:33–37, Jesus confronts them for wanting superiority over one another. After the Lord’s Supper, they will again argue about which one is the greatest (Lk 22:24). They are too full of themselves to recognize true adoration from Mary, and their sinful mindset allowed Judas to tap into their anger easily.

So, they all turn on Mary. Some calls for social action are nothing more than hardships on the believer, and we see that as they are scolding her. She may have even wondered whether she did the right thing. That is when Jesus steps in to have a word with them.

B. The Corrective for an Angry Heart (vv. 6–9)

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

First, we must notice Jesus's stern rebuke and interrogation. We must not think that we are an island; our actions affect others and will be judged. Romans 14:7–9, "For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." In 2 Corinthians 5:10, we read of the bema judgement: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Jesus said, "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment (Mt 12:36). He stands up for His saints, so let us never be found guilty of attacking a fellow believer!

Jesus then explains why her act was not wasteful. First, even if it had been sold and not used on Jesus, it is not as though she would have ended poverty. As long as there is a world, there will be poor people. Redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor won't solve poverty. Some problems in life can't be fixed by throwing money at them.

This is the second half of the reason why this perfume has not been wasted. Jesus reminds them that He's about to suffer and die. Since the time is short (in contrast to the ongoing condition of the poor), she made a far better use of the perfume; He declares His worth. We should not draw from this a requirement for worship to be expensive (lest we be guilty of condemning the offerings of the poor as insufficient), but instead a statement of His worth. Moreover, Jesus exalts Himself to a place of prominence over the poor; it is far better to show Him adoration than to give to the poor (though we can also show our love for Him *by* giving to the poor).

This demonstrates that there is a greater priority than simple acts of charity, even if they seem necessary. The gospel may provide good news to the poor (Is 61:1; Lk 4:16, 21), but the impoverished are not the focus of the gospel. Christ must have preeminence, but just as unbelieving Judas does here, questions of social reform and justice have subtly distracted believers from their Lord for the past hundred-plus years.

This is something that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones addressed in his book, *Preachers and Preaching*.¹ He was addressing the decline of church attendance even in his day in Britain, and he notes that some were saying that preaching was the problem. "The people, they say...are interested in politics, they are interested in social conditions, they are interested in the various injustices from which people suffer in various parts of the world, and in war and peace. So, they argue, if you really want to influence people in the Christian direction you must not only talk politics and deal with social conditions in speech, you must take an active part in them."

He calls this "the social application of the Gospel," no different than the "social gospel." It rests on the argument that the "old evangelical preaching of the gospel was too personal, too simple, that it did not deal with the social problems and conditions." He goes on to blame "social gospel preaching" for the emptying

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching: 40th Anniversary Edition*, Electronic Edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). No page numbers available.

of churches in Great Britain above all else. Why? Because it renders the church unnecessary. People can go elsewhere to hear about political and social reform.

He isn't saying that we should be unconcerned about questions of social justice, but rather it's usurping the message of Christ. (Just as Judas has succeeded in doing here.) Lloyd-Jones continues, "This concern about the social and political conditions, and about the happiness of the individual and so on, has always been dealt with most effectively when you have had reformation and revival and true preaching in the Christian church." He points to the Christian church as the best answer to these concerns, saying that "when the Church performs her primary task these other things invariably result from it."

When people discover their sinfulness and the corrective they can find in the gospel, like this woman, they find hope to change and joy unspeakable. In this case, we're talking about anger. In Ephesians 4:31–32, we read, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Through the exalted Christ we find both the motivation and the power to overcome the sinful deceptions of the heart.

V. The Heart of Apostasy (vv. 10–11)

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time.

Apparently, looking at Jesus through the eyes of Mary was the final straw for Judas. He seeks out the chief priests, knowing they would be receptive because they put out a notice (Jn 11:57). His betrayal wasn't a surprise, but completely within the plan of God (cf. Pss. 41:9; 55:12–15, 20, 21; Zech. 11:12, 13; John 6:64, 70, 71; 13:18; 17:12).

The parallel explains that He requests compensation, and they promised him thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:15) — the price of a slave (see Ex 21:32), fulfilling prophecy (Zec 11:12). None of that seems to bother Judas. Money seems to be his driving motivation, his true lord, and we're warned that its love is the root of all sorts of evil (1 Tm 6:10). In fact, it's possible that his call to care for the poor was a smokescreen so he could steal some of the money (Jn 12:6). His unrepentant sin and rejection of Christ's words go hand-in-hand.

Judas commits to helping the chief priests find a better time to capture Jesus than during the feast (vv. 1–2). It would have to be a time when Jesus was away from the crowds (Lk 22:6). He will earn his blood-money.

VI. Conclusion

This is a passage of contrasting hearts. Judas and the priests find a foil in the woman with the perfume. She was moved by Christ to give an expensive gift of worship; the high priests were moved by Christ to give an expensive gift of blasphemy. We also see a foil in the disciples; she who they scolded was praised by Jesus. May we learn from the mistakes of the others and confess our sins, turning freely to the Lord in faith.