



Speaker:
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The Prophetic Anointing of Jesus

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 47 of 47

5/9/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 14:1-11**

After two days was the feast of the Passover and of unleavened bread. And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take him by craft and put him to death. But they said, *Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar of the people.*

And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard—very precious—and she broke the box and poured it on his head.

And there were some that had indignation within themselves and said, *Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor.* And they murmured against her.

And Jesus said, “Let her alone. Why trouble you her? She hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good, but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could. She is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. Verily I say unto you: wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.”

And Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went unto the chief priests, to betray him unto them. And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. And he sought how he might conveniently betray him.

You remember last week we covered the whole of Mark’s 13th chapter. I knew it was going to be difficult to explain that chapter, but I hope it was clear enough to give you something to think about. Today’s message is shorter and less “heavy” if you like.

The event is situated in Bethany. This was a small village to the east of the Mount of Olives and was only about two miles away from Jerusalem. Since arriving in the area, Jesus and the disciples used Bethany as their “base camp”.

The portion I read today started with the Jewish plot to kill Jesus, went on to describe what happened in the house in Bethany, and finished with the decision by Judas to betray his master. It’s possible you’ve noticed this sort of sandwich arrangement used by Mark. He does this deliberately to highlight a contrast. Here, the contrast is between the dedicated evil of the conspirators versus the selfless act of love by this woman.

The religious leaders: what was *their* problem? They’d tried to outsmart Jesus if you remember. They went head-to-head with him in a battle of wisdom—and lost. Several times. Jesus’s assault on them and their corrupt temple worship was incessant. And they

now felt they were losing control of the situation. This is why they went back to their original plan which was to kill Jesus.

What of Judas? What was the matter with him? He'd enjoyed a privilege unparalleled in history: to be a disciple and friend with the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. He'd witnessed more miracles than anyone who'd ever lived. He was blessed by being taught by the Son of God himself. What could cause a man to treat this privilege with such disdain?

Money. Judas loved money. And sadly, he loved it more than anything else. Among that band of missionaries, he was the one in charge of the cash. It makes me wonder how *he* ended up with that job. My guess is he volunteered so he could cream off some of their income. This would explain why it was the event we've read about today which tipped him over the edge. Had this woman donated her fancy perfume to be sold to feed the poor, Judas will have had a chance to cream off a few thousand pounds without anyone noticing.

Our focus today though is not on Judas or the religious leaders. We're going to be looking at two people. There's the one who committed a great act of love, and there's the one who it was directed to.

Giving Sacrificially

As you know, I like to give modern equivalents when it's useful. This perfume is said to have been worth 300p. By looking at the average wage at that time, we can estimate what that means in today's money. If you haven't heard this before, it may come as a shock to you. This stone vessel was *filled* with this perfume, and in today's money it would have been worth maybe £15-£20,000. *And she tipped the lot on Jesus!*

Without the benefit of hindsight, there's not one of us who wouldn't have acted like the disciples. It looked utterly irresponsible.

Let's think back to the widow in the temple as a comparison. She donated her last pound to the work of God. So you can see in both cases the behaviour of these women was outwardly irresponsible. Yet in neither case did Jesus speak of them negatively.

You'll also notice the extremes in the giving. One gave her last pound; the other gave her life savings. And I'm sure this contrast was meant to be spotted by us. It teaches us that **when someone gives to God in faith, no gift is too small to be valued by God, and no gift is so large that it seen by God as wasteful**. If you're not well off, give generously. If you're wealthy, give generously.

Paul, when writing to the church at Corinth, spoke about the generosity shown by the church in Macedonia. They had next to nothing, but what they had they were willing to share for the work of the gospel. Paul uses them as an example worth following:

Therefore, as ye abound in everything, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

This woman was prepared to give sacrificially, and so should we. As we saw the other week, we're to give of our income, our time, our strength, our abilities—to give *our whole hearts* to God and the cause of the gospel.

Think on the sacrifice of Jesus himself. Think how he gave his very life for sinful people. How he placed himself at the mercy of the authorities, knowing he would receive none. How he refused to get the help of angels to save his life and destroy his killers. How he endured the inward intensity of his father's hatred for sin. And he did all this for sinners like you and me. People who came into this world with a natural hatred for God. Were it not for the grace of God, we'd find the tomb of Jesus and spit on it if we could.

But through this incredible sacrifice, God saves people. Not all, but some. I imagine most, if not all, people watching this today will belong to God. But if you don't, we pray you go to him today and plead with him. *NOW is the accepted time*, the Bible says. *NOW is the day of salvation*.

Honouring Openly

It's an interesting environment for this act to take place. It's not in Jerusalem but a small village. The owner of the house is a leper, or former leper, as we read in verse 3. And at the very centre of this incident was a woman. Women, as you know, had a certain place in that society, and they were expected to recognise that.

Scattered throughout the gospels we see people who had no right approaching Jesus. According to the manners of that society, their behaviour was seen as inappropriate. Think of Jesus being harassed by the blind beggar. Think of the woman wanting to be healed forcing her way through the crowd to touch Jesus's clothes. Think of the parents bringing their little children to Jesus for a blessing. Think of this woman having the audacity to approach Jesus during a meal. This wasn't the done thing.

But their need was more important than observing good manners. And this woman was determined. She grabs her fancy perfume and rushes over to Jesus to anoint him.

We read elsewhere that this woman had saved this perfume for precisely that moment. The time had come. This was likely the highlight of her whole life—the anointing of her saviour.

You'll also see in v.3 how Mark reports she didn't pour the ointment out in the usual way. We'd expect her to take off the cap or remove the cork or whatever it was. But for seemingly no good reason she smashes the thing!

The alabaster container was a common, but attractive, way to store perfume and other things. It's really stone, you know. But it's a soft stone, so it can be sculpted and shaped easily. (This means it doesn't weather so well, so isn't used for building with.) It can also be polished for an attractive finish.

We might think she smashed this out of a sense of urgency. She was excited the time had come to perform this small but significant ritual. Maybe that was it.

But I suspect there could be another reason. In breaking this flask, it became unusable. And perhaps this was the point. For her, this perfume was being saved for this moment. The flask will have served its purpose. She intended to use the lot on Jesus, so she didn't need to keep an intact flask to keep a bit back for herself. **The breaking of the flask signifies the totality of the gift and the completeness of the sacrifice.**

You might be tempted to look for some other significance in this anointing. You'll maybe know prophets, priests and kings were often anointed when taking office. And such was the faith of this woman that she undoubtedly held Jesus to be the greatest prophet, the greatest high priest, and the greatest king.

But I tend to think her motive was only **to declare her faith in Jesus as the Messiah who had to die.** Jesus knew she'd been keeping this to anoint him prematurely for his burial. You may already be aware that dead people were anointed in that culture. The powerful perfumes or spices would offset the bad odour that'd quickly come through the decomposition of the body.

This was something else the disciples had missed so far. They didn't seem to have cottoned on that this was happening; Jesus **was** going to deliberately hand himself over to be put to death. Jesus had told them. For example, when Peter had that epiphany and confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Saviour immediately followed this with an announcement of his coming death.

Was there not something else of significance in this extravagant act? It certainly speaks of a wholesale sacrifice to the Lord. But when we consider the anointing of a dead body was to preserve it—if only temporarily—**the overabundance of Jesus's anointing here makes us look later on to that time in the grave when he didn't see any corruption:**

Wherefore he saith also in another psalm, Thou shalt not suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption; but he, whom God raised again, saw no corruption.

Acts 13:35–37

Yes: THE SUPER-EXCESS OF PERFUME SIGNIFIED THE PERFECT PRESERVATION OF JESUS IN THE GRAVE BECAUSE HE WASN'T THERE TO STAY. The same one who handed himself over to sinners to lay down his life FOR sinners had determined he was going to raise himself from the dead after three days.

Testifying humbly

If you look in a couple of the other gospels that relays this story, you'll see the woman also anoints Jesus's feet, and she uses her own hair to wash them. I can hardly think of a humbler act than this.

This whole ritual of hers was an unspoken testimony. She was declaring the Lord's death. But more than that, *she was testifying about his burial.* And it's because Jesus was buried,

we know his was a proper death, so her certainty about him going into a grave was important.

It's interesting, isn't it, to take note of these people Jesus encountered who exercised great faith. More often than not, the people who show great faith are not who we'd expect. This is especially so in Mark's gospel. And today's episode reminds us of another pattern in the life of Jesus, and that is **the prominence of women**. It's quite striking to see how we've been discussing females who've epitomised dedication to God, while most opposition to Jesus, including the schemes to kill him, have come from men! Leadership may be a male arena, and there are important theological reasons for maintaining that, but the Holy Spirit has made sure we see in holy writ that women are valued as much as men in the kingdom of God.

I'd like you to look at some of the things this woman said. Now I don't want you to look for too long, mainly because she didn't say *anything*! As far as we can see from the Scriptures, the woman kept silent throughout the whole episode.

This was a humble testimony. She was, unavoidably, the centre of attention. But she didn't want recognition. And we should take a leaf out of her book. We too shouldn't desire recognition for what we do in the Lord's work. Some of the Lord's people have said to me they do a lot for God. Or in the past they've done a lot for God.

I give them the benefit of the doubt. They've forgotten themselves. But you can't help wondering if these works were truly done for God alone.

We're not to seek recognition. For one, if we receive praise and glorification for our hard work or "incredible" sacrifices, **we rob God of the glory due to him**.

- All our good works are ordained of God
- He keeps us alive while we do them
- He gives us the abilities to do them
- He even gives us the very desire and the will to do them

At no stage is there anything for which you should be congratulated. (And by the way, this is the reason I strongly discourage people from congratulating new Christians on their baptism.)

Whether this woman liked it or not, her act has found its way into the Scriptures of God. And before there even was a New Testament, there was the promise of Jesus that this wholehearted consecration to God would find its way into the pages of history. Like the widow in the temple, she wouldn't have wanted this; but her example has been immortalised, and it was in order that we might be amazed and challenged.

I said we shouldn't think our reactions would've been any different than the disciples'. They were horrified at the sheer waste in this woman's actions. They'd rightly been conditioned to have a responsible attitude towards the resources the Lord provides.

If I were given a million pound today, I'd use it responsibly. I won't lie; I'd use a lot of it on myself and the family. We'd be able to own our own home, for example. We'd probably provide our children with places to live to. But I definitely build us a new church! And it would be a blessing to the folks at New Road as much as me.

But let's say I'd told them I was going to spend half a million pound on them. With the dilapidated state of the present building, they'd be happy at the thought of a newer, safer one. But if I took the half million and spent it instead on a giant bronze model of the Bible, the people would be quite rightly devastated. Why spend all that money in such a wasteful way?

In our passage, we see it was Passover time. And it was customary to give money to the poor. The disciples were right at least on this: that twenty grand could've been spent feeding the poor.

Here's the difference between those two examples. How she spent her money *wasn't irresponsible*. If you think about it, the value of a gift that we give someone is an indication of the worth of the person we give it to. We spend more on our family than on strangers because we value them more, don't we? **And in this act of extravagance, this woman shows she is the only one who truly understands the incomparable worth of Jesus Christ.**

What the disciples were saying was, *don't spend that much on Jesus*. Don't go over the top.

In many things, moderation is good. The Bible even says so. **But it's to be avoided in our devotion to God.** We don't honour God in moderation. We don't serve him with restraint.

Our late brother Don Fortner shared a story from his youth. Like many believers before their conversion, he got up to no good. Living next door to him was a respectable chap. He was some kind of government agent—FBI maybe. And throughout his youth, our brother was never once challenged by this man for his antisocial behaviour.

That all changed when Don was saved. Word got round. The neighbour heard it and approached the young convert. *Getting religion is okay*, he said, *as long as you do it in moderation*. Don't go overboard. Don't get carried away.

The Bible uses another word for moderation. It's found in the book of Revelation, and the word is *lukewarm*. It's a position you take when you're neither unsaved nor completely devoted to God. These people will attend church services, but they won't take part in evangelism. They'll happily tell others they attend church, as if it's some kind of indication of respectability, but they won't tell those people they're in danger and need Jesus Christ as their saviour. They want a private Christianity which doesn't cause others to think they're mad. Jesus says to such people: *you disgust me. I'll spit you out*.

Friends, I heartily encourage you to become an *extremist*. In your commitment to God, become a *true zealot*. In your evangelism, let your sincerity and enthusiasm shine through, not concerned that many people will think you've lost your mind.

Jesus Christ didn't need to be covered in spikenard. Just like he didn't need those fancy gifts he got from the Magi when he was a young child. But the costliness of these objects goes in some way to helping us appreciate the worthiness of that man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

You know what he did want from that woman? **Her heart.** And that's exactly what she gave him. Brothers and sisters: he wants your whole heart. Will you not give it?

...that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

John 5:23

By our faith in Jesus Christ; by our obedience to the commandments of Jesus Christ; and by our witness to others of his so great salvation; we honour him. And in honouring Jesus, we honour our Trinitarian God.

Amen.