

### Mark 14:3-9

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted? <sup>5</sup> For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they criticized her sharply. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. <sup>7</sup> For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. <sup>9</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."

Other gospels cover this story. And as usual, the other gospels give us some details that Mark leaves out.

We need to look at Matthew 26:6-13, and John 11:55-11:21 to get the full story. First, Mark is probably dropping back to Sunday at the beginning of the week in telling this story. This is when Christ first arrived at Bethany. This would fit the other gospel's telling of the story.

They are at Simon's house.

The text says they are at **Simon, the leper's, house**, but no one would meet for a meal at a leper's house. So this must be at a house of a leper that was healed. That makes a lot of sense as anyone healed of leprosy would feel very obliged to Christ for healing them. And since there was no cure for leprosy at the time, it would have had to have been Christ that healed him. That is probably what is happening here. This is probably Simon the ex-leper. He was probably healed by Jesus and now he is expressing his appreciation.

John gives us a great deal of detail that the other gospels don't. In John we find out more about who is attending this meal. We find out that Lazarus, Mary and Martha are there. Naturally Martha is serving the meal. She is doing the work of hospitality. But this time we don't hear anything about any complaints. Maybe Martha has finally come around to seeing that no one else is obligated to provide the service that she finds fulfillment in giving. Maybe she is no longer looking around to see if everyone else is giving the same thing she is giving. Maybe she is learning to find satisfaction and fulfillment in the gift that God has given to her. Maybe she will never be in the spotlight. But at the end of the day, it will be because of her work that there will be platforms for ministry that would not have existed without her. Service is a wonderful gift. It is often not very applauded, but it is oh so very essential.

Do you see things needing done **in the family of believers** or towards those who are **outside of Christ**? Can you **do** those things? Do you **want** to do those things? Are they right to do? If the answer is yes, do them. But don't do them if you will harbor a grudge toward those who chose to do something else. Do them as unto the Lord, looking to Him for your reward. That is how the gifts He gives us are to function. Martha ruined what she gave at the first meal she served to Christ, because she was looking at what Mary was doing. Here we see the name of Martha doing an essential task. She is mentioned in the Bible for all to see. And what does it say? Martha served. Could people sum up our lives by saying- He served the Lord or she served the Lord? That is a very very good thing. On judgment day that will be the assessment given. Well done my good and faithful SERVANT.

John also tells us that Lazarus is here. Lazarus is very hated by the religious elite. He was raised from the dead and everyone knows it. The rulers would like to send him back to the dead. But they know that would not be received well. As far as I know, Lazarus never did anything notable other than dying and then serving as a testimony to the power of God. Don't we all want to do the Mary kinds of things? Mary was the spotlight person. But it was Lazarus who was used as evidence that Christ was of God. Lazarus was the evidence of the power of God through Christ.

We all have a part to play. We all have different gifts. Maybe God's primary purpose for your life is to display His power in your life. Maybe he wanted you to have great weaknesses so He could display His great strength through your life. Maybe He just wants to use you as a display to the world of what he can do with dead flesh. But that requires that you apply the resurrection power of Christ to overcome those weaknesses. It requires saying no to flesh and yes to Christ. It requires leaving the deadness behind and walking in newness of life.

But Mary is the star player in our text. We will find out it was Mary who poured the oil on Christ in the book of John.

There is always a Mary or a Peter in the crowd. And thank God there will be lots of them in eternity with us. They are the people who always seem to be the center of attention. There is something remarkable about them that causes them to stand out. It is easy for people who are more reserved, who are less visible, to envy the Marys and the Peters. We ascribe motives to them that they don't have. Our flesh lies to itself about the evil of all of this. But at the end of the day, the quicker we accept that God has given us all different parts to play, the more content we will be with the part He has given us.

There are some things we need to understand before we really get this passage. It says:

**a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.**

Now the alabaster flask was a flask most likely carved of stone in Egypt. The flask itself would be expensive. It was carved in a way that would have a very small opening at one end. It would cause this very precious fluid to come out very slowly. It was essentially a stone bottle.

It contained pure nard. Nard was a spice that was grown in India. So it would have been imported a great distance at a large price. It was very fragrant. It would often be used to prepare a body for the grave. It would ward off the smell of rotting flesh for a while.

We find that it was worth 300 denarii. What this means is that it was worth a year's wages. That would be our equivalent of maybe \$30,000. It would be the price of one of our very good brand new vehicles.

We really need to understand the value before we get the idea of what she really did.

She took that valuable commodity. And then she took the valuable flask it was in and broke it. This would have even added to the expense of her gift. She probably broke it so she could quickly empty it.

We find in the gospel records that she emptied it out on Jesus head and his feet. I found this next passage in Warren Wiersbe's commentary.

**Mary (v. 7).** Only John identifies this woman as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. She is found only three times in the Gospels, and in each instance she is **at the feet of Jesus**. She sat at His feet and **listened to the Word** ([Luke 10:38-42](#)); she came to His feet **in sorrow** after the death of Lazarus ([John 11:28-32](#)); and she **worshiped at His feet** when she anointed Him with the ointment ([John 12:1ff](#)).

Mary was a deeply spiritual woman. **She found at His feet her blessing, she brought to His feet her burdens, and she gave at His feet her best.** When we combine the Gospel records, we learn that she anointed both His head and His feet, and wiped His feet with her hair. A woman's hair is her glory ([1 Cor. 11:15](#)). She surrendered her glory to the Lord and worshiped Him with the precious gift that she brought. It was an act of love and devotion that brought fragrance to the whole house.

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Don't you love this about Mary? She was truly a special woman. She shows her humanity in her responses to Christ. But we always find her coming back to Jesus feet. We notice that she does not require praise. She is not looking for a lofty position. She isn't trying to get to be one of Jesus's cabinet members. She doesn't want an attention getting position. She isn't even looking to be

appreciated like her sister. She doesn't do anything that she sees as being of great value. She doesn't try to impress Christ with her service. She just does those things in worship that come to her heart to do. She takes that what she has and devotes it to Christ. She loves Him. That is all. And she wants to be with Him and hear from Him whenever she can. There is only one thing that is needed and somehow she knows exactly what that is. It is to be with Christ.

Here is an example to follow. Men and women would do well to follow it. The disciples would have done well to learn from Mary. Pretty soon they will be arguing about who is the greatest again. But that thought doesn't seem to enter Mary's head. She is simply enthralled with her master. She loves Christ and wants to be with Him and learn from Him. Nothing more. His presence is what she wants.

Oh to be like Mary. Oh to want only the fellowship of Christ, to sit at His feet in worship, to commune with him with the hours we have, to pour upon Him that which we have that is the most valuable to us. To simply lay it at His feet due to our love for Him.

What do we do with that which is most valuable to us? Do we hoard it for ourselves? Do we protect it for ourselves? Do we hold it tightly and plan for how we will use it for our pleasure or our security?

Mary did none of that. She had something that was worth a great deal. She may have amassed this treasure by being very frugal. It must have been something that held a great value for her. This kind of thing would not just fall into your hands. This was a very wealthy extravagance. It likely came to her by discipline and sacrifice. It was hers to do as she saw fit. She could have done a lot of things with this that would have put her in a better more secure position in life.

But when the chance came to spend it in service to her Master, she could not think of a better use for it.

Now consider this. Practically what did she accomplish? Really, how long would this wonderful smell last? What practical need would it meet? What would it end up doing?

We really need to consider this. There is a degree that our service to God is really not intended to be practical. This had to be hard on a woman like Martha, but oddly enough it was Mary who got the best press. She just loved Jesus. She wasn't practical. Her love was extravagant. It was almost thoughtless in its boundaries. Is this wise? Well maybe it is not when it is human love, love looking to be reciprocated. But when we are loving God, there is no price to pay that is really out of bounds. When we look at the price that God has paid for us, when we look at the price he paid knowing he would get nothing similar in return, there is really nothing we can give to God that would be inappropriate, that would be out of place.

All of us here have built up defenses. Even to those who are closest to us we know there are weaknesses in others that can cause us harm. But when we are talking about Christ, there is nothing of that kind with Him. He only ever loves us. He takes care of us. He sacrifices for us. So we do not have to guard ourselves. We can give that which is of greatest value to us for Him, and we will never be ripped off. It will never be seen as foolish.

There is another quote from Warren Wiersbe I wanted to read.

**Notice that every time Mary sought to do something for Jesus, she was misunderstood. Her sister Martha misunderstood her when Mary sat at Jesus' feet to hear Him teach the Word. Judas and the other disciples misunderstood her when she anointed Jesus. Her friends and neighbors misunderstood her when she came out of the house to meet Jesus after Lazarus had been buried ([John 11:28-31](#)). When we give Jesus Christ first place in our lives, we can expect to be misunderstood and criticized by those who claim to follow Him.**

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I don't know why this is, but it seems that those who are purest in their worship of God, those who think nothing of paying the greatest price are often maligned by those who pretend to be spiritual. I think it is because the best examples of Christians always make us look bad. They are willing to give more than we are. They are reckless in their service of God. And they make our rules and principles designed to keep us comfortable look ridiculous and selfish. So we want to badmouth them. We want to make them look bad. We want to come up with a reason to condemn what they do.

We really really need to watch out for this in us. It is bad, very bad.

Let's see it in action.

**<sup>4</sup> But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted? <sup>5</sup> For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they criticized her sharply.**

We find from the other gospels that it was Judas who first raised this criticism. He probably whispered it to other disciples.

The mention of the poor is natural because it was the custom for the Jews to give gifts to the poor on the evening of the Passover.

I don't like this passage. I don't like it because I see the same tendencies in me. I suspect if we look closely, many of us do. We think practically. We evaluate the facts according to a standard that makes sense to us. We think like Martha. We think like Judas. And we think we are just being faithful and frugal. How often have you found yourself finding fault in other people's acts of service toward Christ? How often have you voiced that criticism to others? And what effect has

that criticism had on the opinions those people we spoke to have toward the people who have done the service?

How often do we assume the worst motive in those who are doing the service?

How often do we think we are superior because we would do it differently? And inside we think we are being like Solomon, but in reality we are being like Judas.

We are being critical of someone else's pure hearted service to the Lord. And we are spreading that undermining and divisive influence. We serve the enemy of our Lord by criticizing someone's service to the Lord.

I remember clearly the last time we went over this passage in a different gospel.

Someone had written an evangelistic letter to someone I knew. The person who wrote it asked me about the effect the letter had on the person. I told the person who wrote the letter that I think it would have been much more effective to have delivered the message in person. Was I right? Maybe so. But what I did was throw a bucket of cold water on the service that had just been performed to the Lord. Was Judas correct that the needs of the poor could have been met with the proceeds of the sale of the perfume? Yes. That was factually correct. But it completely misses the point. As believers we need to foster other believer's acts of worship to the Lord. And we need to think long and hard before we criticize it or try to improve it. The correct thing for me to do would have been to be grateful for the attempt at ministry to a non-believer. The correct thing for the disciples to do would have been to put Judas in his place and honored this amazing extravagant gift that Mary gave to Christ.

Notice that the disciples criticized her sharply. The word used means violent displeasure. They were belittling Mary forcefully. They were angry with her. This is how flesh ministers. It comes up with issues that come from our own perceptions or priorities or pet peeves. They are not from God. And flesh enforces those legalisms harshly. How do you think Mary felt here? What an awful thing those disciples were doing. We have got to ask the question, who did they think they were? What authority did they think they had to do such a thing? Think of the effect their so-called ministry would have had on Mary. What is she supposed to do? Can she wipe it back up and put it in the jar? Should she think that what she just did at a huge personal price to herself was just a huge mistake? That it held no value whatsoever? What a devastating ministry this was by so called followers of Christ.

We do well to never, ever follow their lead. Sometimes we do best to just shut up and watch. We sometimes need to look at other's acts of service from a different perspective. Even our efforts to be helpful and informative can sometimes be destructive if we are not careful. Our perspectives are often flawed. We do well to talk to God before we start talking to others. Jesus would have given the disciples very different advice than they gave themselves.

We learn from John's gospel that Judas's motivation was less than sincere. He wanted those funds in the kitty so he could steal them.

Here is another quote from Warren Wiersbe.

**Judas' life is a warning to those who pretend to serve Christ but whose hearts are far from God. He is also a warning to those who waste their opportunities and their lives. "Why this waste?" asked Judas when he saw that expensive ointment poured out on Jesus. Yet Judas wasted his opportunities, his life, and his soul! Jesus called him *son of perdition* ([John 17:12](#)) which literally means "son of waste.**

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. <sup>6</sup> **But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me.**

The disciples criticized. But Jesus said. We do well to find out first what God says before we apply what people say. The disciples could have easily asked Christ what He thought before they entered this ministry from hell.

Look what Christ says to Mary's critics.

**"Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me.**

Jesus immediately puts things into the proper perspective. He shows the disciples who is right and who is wrong. There are times in your life when this is all you have to rely upon. Your acts of worship and obedience of God may be maligned. Your motives or wisdom might be brought into question. And it may take a while for the people of God to receive the correction that they need. In fact, it might be after they die that they will be straightened out. But you can always rest in this confidence. God always protects His own. If you have done what you believed to be the right thing for the right reason, God knows that. Even if no one else does, He does. And He will receive it properly, even if no one else does.

Now, how would you feel if you were one of the disciples here? I can't think of a greater rebuke of their ministry. Christ says **let her alone**. Do you see what He is saying? Your ministry is so bad guys, that she would better off **not to be ministered to at all** than **to be ministered to by you**. Your ministry is just trouble. You are correcting her, when what she has done is **good**. And what you are doing is **bad**.

If ever there was an example to avoid, this is it. Never do ministry that does more harm than good, that **ministers discouragement** for doing good, that finds fault in what God finds to be a good thing. Mary was doing what she felt was the right thing for the right reason. Jesus regarded it as such. True ministry has to learn to see people's actions through God's perspective. If you cannot find God's perspective through God's Word, it is best to remain silent.

Notice too that the disciples said that the precious ointment was wasted. It wasn't wasted. Look what else Christ says.

**<sup>7</sup> For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. <sup>9</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."**

There have always been poor people and there always will be. That is not something that is good. It just is. This is not an excuse to do nothing about it. We are told to look out for the needs of the poor, especially believers that are poor.

Jesus's criticism is not because the disciples were **too concerned for the poor**. Knowing what we know of the disciples, this sudden concern for the poor was probably hypocritical. They put it on like a robe. But suppose they really had such a sincere concern for the poor and they truly wanted to meet the needs that this money could meet. Christ's criticism would be the same.

The problem here is the failure of the disciples **to prioritize and discern the value of worship**. Our service to God is only as good as our worship of God. If an act of service does not stem from our worship of God, it has no value. Worship comes first. It is the connection that allows for everything else good in our lives. So you cannot apply some formula that prioritizes **acts of service** over **acts of worship**. In fact, if you are going to prioritize, prioritize your **worship of God** over your **acts of service to God**. Make sure your relationship with God is right. Make sure He has the proper place in your life. Make sure He is on the throne. Make sure you **live for His pleasure** before you **act for His pleasure**. Nothing messes up a church like people who do stuff for God but are not worshipping God.

Mary was pretty amazing. She usually got it right. She displays to us a person who worships Christ with all that she is. In this case she was driven by her worship of the person of Christ to pour upon him the most lavish gift she had. I doubt she knew she was preparing him for His death. In fact, I doubt she knew the significance of what she was doing at all. She simply did it because it was the thing she most wanted to do. And it was used to meet a need she wasn't even aware existed. That is often how the best ministry happens in our lives. When we do those things we feel compelled to do in our service to God.

It is interesting that Jesus said, she has done what she could. There are a thousand things that Mary **couldn't** do. But this she **could** do. That is another example for us to follow. Don't worry about the things you can't do. Focus on the ones you can. Because that is the service God has for you. God has a purpose for making you the person you are. He has granted you life situations for a



purpose. They will be different from other people's. Live for Christ where you are. You don't need to be like any other believer. Do what YOU can do.

**<sup>9</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."**

This is the coolest thing. When Mary decided to minister in this way to Christ, she had no idea whatsoever that her record would be read by millions, maybe billions of people. She had no idea we would be reading it today and speaking of how good an example of worship and service she provides. She only knew one thing. She wanted with all her heart to express to Christ the value He held in her life. She wanted to express His worth to her. That is worship. That is all she knew. And this was the way she decided that she could best display it. So she decided to do it.

And look what happened. The disciples did their **ministry of flesh** in criticizing this act of worship. I am sure Mary was hurt and confused by it. But Christ turns it around and does something for Mary I don't think He did for anyone else. He includes what she did in the record of the Gospel for an amazing purpose. It will be told as a memorial to her. This must have been one of the most precious ministries ever done to Christ. Christ never included anything as a memorial to anything **the disciples had done**. But this thing the disciples criticized was going to be example to all believers for all time of a woman who knew how to worship correctly.

I guess to sum it up there are at least two solid applications.

How is our ministry similar to the disciples? The ministry of flesh that criticizes true acts of worship. Do you see yourself here? Do you see ways that you are critical of others service and worship of the Lord? Do you question the wisdom or the motives of those doing those acts? It would be very good for us to consider what we are doing carefully. If we don't we may find that we, like the disciples, do more harm than good.

And how is our worship similar to Mary's, giving all that we have gladly and joyfully to our savior in an expression of appreciation for His worth to us? Mary was not intending to do a great thing. She was just being congruent with her life and her heart. She did with her hands what her heart desired to do. What worth does Christ hold in your heart? How do you want to show it? Jesus here is encouraging us to worship Him. He is pointing out for all to see the value in worshipping Him. Mary did it with a bottle of perfume. Maybe we do it by dedicating time to read and pray. Maybe we do it by the work we do with our hands in His service. Maybe we do it by saying no to the temptations we very much want to say yes to. Our lives will never be wasted in our worship of our Lord.

