

# A Beautiful Thing

*Read Mark Learn*

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**Bible Text:** Mark 14:1-11  
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Well, let's take our Bibles this morning and turn to Mark 14. Mark 14 because you come to the morning service does not necessarily mean that you come to the best service, and that's usually the evening service, by the way. And we've been going through Mark. I started doing it before COVID hit. Then after COVID, Gavin wanted to do the evening service for quite a considerable time, which was great, great series on Matthew. And then I got back into a little bit of it and I'm going to finish it in the morning over the summer. We're going to finish the book of Mark.

We're reading a chapter 14, and, well, I'll tell you some things about Mark. You don't know anything about it because you weren't at the evening service, most of you, so it'll be an education for you. Anyway, let's read it together or I'll read it to you. Chapter 14, verse 1.

1 It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him [Jesus] by stealth and kill him, 2 for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people." 3 And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. 4 There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. 9 And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." 10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. 11 And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now, one of the things you would know about the gospel of Mark had you been at said evening services back in the day, is that Mark is noted for the speed with which events unfold. His is a gospel of action, dramatic movement, as he sweeps us past the landmarks of our Lord's life at a dizzying pace. And whenever Jesus then comes to the place where he comes to Jerusalem, Jerusalem has been in the background, he comes to Jerusalem, things start to slow down considerably. Just as when you go to any city, the traffic slows down, so the traffic of Jesus' life slows down when he goes to Jerusalem. And there in that period, events that are taking place are interpreted more fully, parables are used and explicated at length, and there are extended teaching seminars on the temple and its fate and on the end of the world; we saw that in chapters 12 and 13.

So that's the background. He's been in Jerusalem. He's now outside of Jerusalem, but while he was in Jerusalem, all these things are taking place, and now Mark accelerates again and the pace will quicken and gather momentum. Things will race towards their climax. One theme that has lurked in the background of the story thus far has been the theme of the climax of Jesus' life, the crisis that is in the stage of being unfolded in Jesus' life by which we understand the crisis of the cross and all that follows from that. Matthew takes two-fifths of his gospel to recount the story. Luke takes a third of his book to recite the story. Mark gives us three-fifths of his book to unfold the story of the cross. Now why such a preoccupation with the end of the story? The answer is, of course, that the revelation of God in Christ reaches its zenith at the work of the cross. The events of that last week of his earthly life are brought about by his determination, his determination to go up to Jerusalem. Against the advice of all of his friends and family, he's going to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world and thereby to give his life as a ransom for his elect people.

The story of this last week then is a tale of plotting and betrayal, of denial and desertion, of injustice and murder, but the story also has its upsides and John gives us the name of this woman who's identified here, this woman Mary, and what Jesus calls the beautiful thing that she had done for him. Now this beautiful thing that's talked about in the passage is the filler between two slices of bread in a sandwich. You can imagine the issue, so the top slice of bread is in the first verse, the bottom layer is in verses 10 and 11. So while this beautiful action takes place by Mary, these other actions are taking place simultaneously. Do you see how I said it in the American way and not the proper way? Simultaneously. I said simultaneously, which shows I'm converting.

So look at verse 1, "It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him." Verses 10 and 11, "Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And he sought an opportunity to betray Jesus." Now these and other references in the book of Mark draw our attention to the fact that Mark, when he's writing his gospel, has the book of Isaiah open right beside him. You see that in chapter 1 actually, in the second verse, big quotation from Isaiah the prophet, and there are allusions to Isaiah or quotations from Isaiah that are found all the

way through the book of Mark, much more so than any of the other gospels, perhaps John accepted. Now one gets the impression then that he saw or was led by the Holy Spirit to see that the circumstances of Isaiah's ministry mirrored in the circumstances of Jesus' ministry. At the time Isaiah was ministering to God, Israel was a recalcitrant nation. He is led to talk about the judicial blinding of the leaders, especially the religious and political leaders of Israel at that time, trusting in their own wisdom and wit, trusting in their own judgment. They were effectively treating Yahweh, God, as their enemy. Isaiah 63 compares to Mark 3:29. And so full of their own wisdom, the people of Israel rejected their Maker and Redeemer. Those were the charges that Isaiah brought against the Israel of his day.

Well, this parallels very closely with Mark. You see how important as you read Mark, Jerusalem is; both in Isaiah and in Mark, Jerusalem figures highly. In Isaiah, it's the wise in their wisdom who reject the word and wisdom of God. Earlier on in the book of Mark, he's told us that these enemies that we've just described in verse 1, these enemies were in Jerusalem. That's where they came from. That's where they were operating.

They were in the Sanhedrin. They were in the temple. They were serving in the place of jurisdiction over the church and over the nation at that time. So here they are then, the opponents of Jesus, these scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, and the elders, these were the people who were opposed to Jesus. Just as in Isaiah's day, it was those kinds of people who were opposed to the God of Israel, and we remind ourselves that these people were professionally responsible for interpreting the law of God to the people. They were responsible for instructing the children and the young people, as well as the adults in the things of God. They were responsible for delivering judicial judgments on behaviors and attitudes and actions that were going on within the nation, within the church of the period. They were responsible for all of these things. Ricky Watts says in his work on Isaiah in Mark, that these men were analogous, the people in Jesus' day were analogous to the wise men of Isaiah's day. Their hostility towards Jesus' teaching takes its final turn towards their rejection of him by the coalition of the three main elements of the Sanhedrin. The parallels with Isaiah emphasize that in rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting the divine word and wisdom of God. In other words, they're rejecting God himself. They are purposefully rejecting him as their messianic king but they're doing more than that because this Yeshua, Yahweh saves, is the Yahweh who saves in Isaiah the prophet.

So in Isaiah, there's a curse spoken on these people. In Isaiah 6, "And he said, 'Go to these people and say, "'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.'" Make the heart of these people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts.'" That was God's prophetic judgment on the leaders in Isaiah's day. So these wise people in Jesus' day come and they, like them in Isaiah's day, are blind and deaf to who Jesus is. The Apostle Paul, looking at this, picks it up in 1 Corinthians 1, and he quotes from Isaiah chapter 29 these words, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." Let's just pause for a moment, but when you read and you study what's being said and done in political circles all over the world at this point, juncture in our history, you see that reflected. God is thwarting the wisdom of those who think they're wise and the cleverness of those who think they're clever.

Now back to the text. Paul goes on to argue that God made foolish the wisdom of the world. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. So that's one side of the sandwich. Let's go down to the other half of the sandwich, the reference to Judas. If the first half refers to the leaders, the leaders perhaps in the state or the nation or the people, the polis of that period, well, Judas Iscariot stands for something far closer to home. Judas is an important figure. He is an influential figure. He is one of the leaders Jesus chose to be with him. He has been part of the apostolic band. He has gone out preaching the message and performing miracles and signs and wonders as the other apostles had done. He is a much trusted figure made to be the treasurer of the apostolic band, trusted with the money and with giving that money to the poor. And it's Judas we read who is out to betray Jesus.

Judas Iscariot, "one of the twelve," notice the underlining of that, you don't get more important than that in the gospels, "went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them." They were glad. They were glad because they didn't have to go and try and hire somebody and find somebody who would betray him. Here they had it handed to them on a plate. They promised to give him money and that made Judas glad and so he sought an opportunity to betray him. I want you to notice that Judas Iscariot is not pushed into this. He's not backed up against a wall to do this. Nobody is putting pressure on him to do this. He is doing this by his own will, by his own initiative, by his own decision. He is responsible fully for his actions and he gives the authorities a surprise pleasure of handing them a tell-all figure.

Now Judas, of course, might have wanted to argue that he was just principled, a principled objector to what Jesus was saying and doing until he takes the money, and when he takes the money, we see this is not a principled objector, this is a paid informer. Mark in his gospel tells us, Satan entered into him for behind every betrayal of Jesus Christ, there is the work of the evil one. As a disciple belonging to the inner band of the apostles, Judas represents the church's sin. Can there be sin in the church? Yes. Every time we gather for worship, brothers and sisters, when we gather together in public, there are sinners here because I'm here. And you're here. There's always been sin in the church and it started even when Jesus was in the church in the body. Judas represents the church and whenever the church is prepared to sacrifice Jesus, perhaps for the world's acclaim, the world's reward, the world's approval, the world's hearing, the world's stopping persecuting us perhaps, the world's laughing at us, the world's whatever the world is doing to the church, whenever somebody is prepared to betray Jesus, to get the praise of this society or this generation, or political approval or support perhaps, whenever somebody is prepared to sell Jesus, and the issues that we face in our day today, whether it's the issues of abortion, or the gender issues, or political powers or ideas, whatever the issues are, and they change for everybody, and they're different for everybody, if you're prepared to sell Jesus for those, then you stand with Judas Iscariot outside the circle of the living ecclesial, apostolic communion of the saints in Jesus Christ.

Well, now we come to the third part of the passage story, the best part. Whereas the religious authorities have their eyes blinded and their hearts hardened, and one of Jesus' most important disciples sees him as a failure and a liability, there's one person whose

eyes are wide open to who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do. She isn't a member of the ecclesial hierarchy; she's not an apostle. She does not hold office in the church, at least at this point, and yet her action has been teaching and challenging the church for nearly 2,000 years. The action itself is, first of all, an act of love, generous love.

Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. He was at dinner when a woman came in with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, pure nard, broke the jar, poured the ointment on his head. This ointment may have been imported from India, from the region of the Himalayas, where it came from. It would have been held in a long-necked alabaster jar, roughly this kind of shape, with a very narrow neck. You broke the neck in order to release the pungent perfume and the pouring ointment. She was fulfilling Scripture when she did this. In the book of Song of Solomon, which is a book about the church, a book about the bride of Christ, there's a prophecy of this very event in chapter 1, verse 12. "While the king was at his table, My perfume gave forth its fragrance." This woman is acting as and for the church in honoring her Lord. In this case, the nard was about a year's salary. That's why Judas is indignant. As an act of uncommon generosity, this woman's action is seen as a visible, ardent display of her love for Jesus. She gave him the most expensive thing she had, and she lavished him with it, literally lavished him with it. By doing this, she shows us what it means for us to love Jesus above all. What does it mean to love Jesus above father and mother and son and daughter, and even an expensive, one-of-a-kind ointment? What does it mean? She teaches us.

Notice that she teaches us also that giving our love to Jesus is even more important than anything we do, even at the level of charity. When the disciples are angry at her for what they said was a waste of ointment, verse 5, and argue that it would have been better to have been sold and the money given to the poor, pardon me, Judas came up with that one, Jesus' response is to leap to her defense. "Leave her alone," he said. "Why are you upsetting her? What she has done for me," he says, "is a beautiful thing. You have the poor always with you. You can always be kind to them. I want you to be kind to them. I want you to be generous with them." And I remind you, it was the Christian church who started caring for the poor and the orphan and the abandoned girls on the city waste dump, and on the women who were forced into having abortions. Early on, right at the very beginning of the church, it was the church that founded the first hospitals. It was the church and the monasteries that taught poor people how to till the ground and get fruit and vegetables from the ground. It was the church that invented beer for the general population so that they could drink something that wasn't polluted, like the water. It was a church that has cared for the poor right up until the present day.

Jesus had no disregard to the poor, but he says there's something even better than that. He calls her action a beautiful action. In the Greek, there are two words for good, *agathos* and *kallos*. The first word *agathos*, which means to do good, to give benefits, or to give something to someone, or even moral good, to do something that's good morally. The second word *kallos* means beautiful, excellent, pleasant, delightful, worthy, virtuous. Now, a thing might be good in the *agathos* sense, that is a moral good. Some people are morally correct and hard, harsh. Some people give you a gift, but there's no warmth to the giving of the gift. That's the *agathos* sense. In the *kallos* sense, a thing is not just good, it's winsome, it's lovely.

The word kallos is used somewhere else that teaches us the relationship between what Jesus himself has done and what this woman is doing. In John chapter 10, verse 11, Jesus uses this word kallos repeatedly when he says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." Jesus is saying, "I've already demonstrated here what it means to be kallos, to be the good shepherd." It means sacrifice. It means giving up your life for someone to demonstrate your love for them. Not in the sense of the young guy who is out with his girlfriend walking along the cliff edge and who says to her, "Do you know how much I love you? Let me show you." And he jumps off the cliff and gets killed. She walks away thankful that she got out of that one. Not that kind of sense. But when Jesus demonstrates his love for us, he lays down his life in place of us, in taking the death we deserved on the cross. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That's in the back of Paul's mind when he says to husbands to love their wives by, what? By dying for them. By giving their life for them, just as Jesus does for his church.

Well, the action that she takes imitates his. In demonstrating her love for him, she's conscious, "He loved me first. I'm loving him back." And I want to tell you that the Lord Jesus loves to see us imitating him in our love for one another. He loves to see that. He recognizes and he rejoices to see the reflection and the likeness of his own love being reflected back to him. So whenever we give generously, freely, whenever we show love to someone without putting conditions on it, then we're imitating the Lord Jesus. And this woman's love for Jesus is extravagant. She didn't do the least. She didn't do the easiest thing or even the noblest thing she could imagine. She poured out her most treasured and expensive possession and in doing this, she showed us the total love, the wholehearted affection she had for her Lord. In offering these things to him, she's offering her entire self. She exemplifies what it means to love Jesus supremely and above all, more than that, to love him more than your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your husband or wife, your son or daughter. Winand puts it like this, "Only in loving Jesus above all will one come to love truly and properly one's own family and the poor."

So I have a question for us this morning. I ask it to myself as well as to you. Do we love Jesus? Do we love Jesus? Do we devote ourselves to him? Do we lovingly offer to Jesus as a sacrifice our lives? Sometimes doing that involves some cost to us. St. Jerome puts it like this, "Unless the alabaster jar is broken, we can't spread its fragrance."

So her action was an act of generous love. Her action was also an act of prophetic insight. Jesus introduces the theological, his own theological commentary on what she does in verse 7, "You will not always have me." You will not always have me. Now that should have been obvious to them. He told them often enough, repeatedly he'd said to them that he was going to die and he was going to leave them, but they didn't believe him. The disciples did not believe him. Back in chapter 8 of Mark, he says this, "He began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again." And what did Peter do there? By the way, the leader of the band, the apostolic band, our best of men, Peter, what did he do? He took Jesus aside and said, "You can't say that. You can't talk about dying because you are not going to die. You are going to take the power and you are going to

reign." That's what Peter said. Maybe I said it better than he did, but that's what he said. And Jesus repeated what he was going to do, "Behold, we're going up to Jerusalem." The Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and to the scribes. They shall condemn him to death and shall hand him over to the Gentiles to do the dirty work.

The disciples couldn't believe it, but this woman did. This woman took it seriously. Jesus said, "She has done what was in her power to do." She had no power to stop the soldiers arresting him. She had no power to stop him going to the cross. She had no power to intervene at that level. Nobody did. It was out of everybody's hands by this stage, but she did what she could do. What did she do? Listen to Jesus, "She anointed me, my body, beforehand for its burial." That's why we have that time marker in verse 1, "It was the Passover." Jesus would come to offer himself as the spotless Passover Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world and Jesus is saying that she got that and that she has acted in advance to anoint Jesus' body for its still future burial. You know, burial was very important in Judaism. Burial was seen as a benevolence that you could never repay. For the Jews, the burial was greater than almsgiving and other deeds of charity.

So Mary is getting ahead of the terrible death that he must die when on the cross, Jesus will be crucified, dead and buried. John Calvin has a great word for what happens in the Lord's Supper. He says that at the Lord's Supper, Christ in his crucifixion is exhibited before our eyes. Here before our eyes on that table, there is wine and bread separated from each other. The wine represents the blood of Christ, the bread, the body of Christ. When you see blood and a body and the blood has all come from that body, you know that that body is dead. Dead. Proof positive the blood poured forth. He was dead. Crucified. Dead and buried. And then whenever we gather around this table, the cross is exhibited before our eyes. We see this visual reminder of the Lord crucified for us in our place.

Well, this woman, Mary, we know her name to be from John's gospel, she worked out that he was going to be numbered with the transgressors and that as such, his body as a crucified man would be thrown into a common grave, precluding the care that would be taken normally in a proper burial. In other words, she's coming to Jesus and she's acknowledging who he was, the suffering servant, and by anointing Jesus, she's acknowledging who he was, sorry, what he was, the suffering servant, who he was, the Messiah. In Israel, kings and priests were anointed before God. The word Messiah draws these elements together. He is the anointed one.

She saw him for what he was and who he was and what's interesting was when the Apostle Paul is discussing the wise of the world, we saw that earlier, and sometimes in the church, who don't get Jesus, he then turns to describe those who do get Jesus. Is he thinking of Mary here? "For you see your calling, brothers, how that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called, but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise and the weak things of the world to confront the things that are mighty, and the base things of the world and the things that are despised has God chosen, yes, and things that are not to bring to nothing things that are so that nobody can glory and boast in his presence." She has done a beautiful thing, a prophetic thing. And she will never be forgotten, Jesus says. She's created a memory for the church.

"Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of," would you think in memory of Jesus? No, "in memory of her." In memory of her.

She will be remembered at all times and all places for her utter devotion to Jesus, her insight into his mission. She has become as one scholar puts it, an icon of the church, such that wherever the church is in space and time, there her devotion will be a model and example of how the church should be. This is what we as a church should look at today. We're not just looking at this as individuals. This is the kind of church we want to be, the kind of church this woman was in pouring out her all for Jesus' sake, in recognizing him to be the Messiah and her anointing of Jesus becomes a gauge of the church's unashamed embrace of a crucified dead and buried Savior.

The first Christians were not immediately impressed by that. The apostles, you'll remember, scattered when Jesus was arrested. They were not persuaded that there was any advantage to having a crucified dead and buried Savior. They soon learned that he's the Savior of the world because of it but she teaches us that that's what he came to do, and we should be like her, lost in wonder, love, and praise, that he should be wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, that the chastisement that was coming to us was played out upon him so that by his whippings, we are healed. I don't know if you know Jesus. You can come to know him by confessing with your mouth that he's Lord, that he's God, and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead. I know that most of you know Jesus, but do you love him? Do we love him?

Let's pray together.

*Lord, as we come to you at this moment, and as we in a moment will gather around the table, we pray that you would bring home to our hearts the beauty, the wonder of this incident, which casts a little shed of light in the midst of the gathering gloom and darkness of our Lord's life, the encouragement to him in his human nature that obviously affected him greatly, that he should call it a beautiful thing, and the privilege of us now remembering this and remembering this dear sister in Christ, whom one day we shall meet, and seeking to emulate her, both as a church corporately and as Christians individually. In the strong name of Jesus we pray. Amen.*