

Beautiful Devotion: Mark 14:1-11
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What are you devoted to in your life? That's the question we're faced with in our passage this morning. What are you truly devoted to? What is it in your life that makes you do crazy things? Is it a bike or a car, a girlfriend or boyfriend, a hobby or sport, your job, your retirement account, the praise of other people? What are you devoted to? What are the things that you want so badly you'll make tremendous sacrifices in other areas of your life in order to get them? And you'll take great risks in order to get them?

We're all devoted to something. In our passage for this morning we'll see two radically different acts of devotion. On the one hand, we'll see a woman's beautiful devotion to Jesus. On the other hand, we'll see a disciple's hideous devotion to himself. The woman gives her most prized possession as a gift to Jesus. She honors Him and shows that He is worthy of such devotion and sacrifice. For her, Jesus is far more precious than money or possessions. And in this we see where her devotion lies. The disciple, Judas Iscariot, betrays Jesus in the hope of getting prized possessions. Judas is more devoted to money than to Jesus.

This is what each of us needs to wrestle with. If we evaluate our lives, if we look at the way we spend our money and the way we spend our time, if we examine our hearts and look honestly at what we most desire, what is it that we're devoted to? Can it truly be said of us that we are devoted to Jesus? I hope so. But what does that mean?

Our study this morning should be convicting and inspiring and hopefully illuminating in terms of what a beautiful devotion to Jesus looks like. We're going to look at a woman's beautiful devotion to Jesus, a disciples' hideous devotion to himself, and Jesus' beautiful devotion to His people.

It's now Wednesday of passion week, and the chief priests and scribes are still looking for a way to get Jesus out of the picture. They want Him dead. The only problem is that they're afraid of the people. It's two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which means the city of Jerusalem is overrun with people. The city has more than doubled in size because of the Passover. The Roman authorities would be taking extra precautions during this time, ready to crack down on any hint of uprising or unrest. So the chief priests and scribes have to plan very carefully. They're seeking how to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."

These first two verses of Mark 14 set the stage for the rest of chapters 14-15. We have now taken a significant step closer to the cross. At the beginning of chapter 11 we entered into Passion week, the week leading up to Jesus' death on Friday and resurrection on Sunday. Now it's Wednesday, and we find ourselves in the midst of the final events leading up to Jesus' imminent death. From here on out, Jesus is going to be betrayed, abandoned, accused, rejected, tortured, and killed.

But first we have the wonderful account of this woman who anoints Jesus in preparation for His burial. Of all the people who will come against Jesus, or desert Him, here is a woman who is whole-heartedly devoted to Him.

There's an interesting structure to this passage which alerts us to something that Mark wants us to learn here. We've seen in other parts of Mark this literary device known as the Markan sandwich. That's the technical term for it—the term the scholars came up with. It's a story sandwiched inside of another story. Here the story of Jesus being anointed at Bethany is sandwiched inside of the story about the plot to kill Jesus.

So what's the significance of that? Well, it seems that Mark wants to highlight for us these two radically different acts of devotion. This woman is radically devoted to Jesus, and she shows her devotion in a most poignant and wonderful way. Judas and the chief priests are radically devoted to things other than Jesus, things which Jesus threatens, and therefore they are scheming in order to bring about His death.

A Woman's Beautiful Devotion to Jesus

During their time in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples have been staying in Bethany. Bethany is about 2 miles east of the Mount of Olives, and they've been travelling back and forth between Jerusalem and Bethany. Here we find them in the house of Simon the leper. This is a really intriguing description. We don't know who this guy is. We do know that he must have been cleansed of his leprosy at some point, or else he wouldn't be hosting a dinner at his house. If he was still a leper, nobody would want to have dinner with him, and he wouldn't even have a house in which to host a dinner. So we have a man who used to be a leper. I think we can pretty safely assume that Jesus had healed this man, cleansed him of his leprosy. He was Simon, the guy who used to be a leper, until he met Jesus.

Who else is at this dinner? Mark doesn't tell us. He leaves a lot of things unsaid. He leaves the woman unnamed. But the Gospel of John gives us some more details. This account is recorded in Matthew 26 and John 12. There's a different, but similar, story also recorded in Luke 7, but that's a different

occasion. It's a different woman and a different event, even though it also involved anointing Jesus.

But in Matthew 26 and John 12 we find parallels to this event we're reading about in Mark 14, and John 12 tells us that the woman is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. And it says that Lazarus was there at the meal, and Martha was serving (still serving!), and Mary was the one who brought out this expensive perfume.

So this is a pretty interesting dinner party! It's one I certainly would have loved to be at. Here you have Simon, who used to be a leper. You have Lazarus, who used to be dead, and is now alive again. And you have Martha and Mary, who are close friends of Jesus. I wonder what the conversation was like. I wonder if Simon and Lazarus talked about what Jesus had done for them. I wonder what the disciples were talking about. I wonder if Martha was still scolding Mary for not helping in the kitchen (see Luke 10:38-42).

Well, then the dinner party gets all the more interesting when Mary pulls off this crazy stunt—at least most everyone in the room thought it was crazy. She walks in with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over Jesus' head. [We're back in Mark 14 now, verse 3] Mark leaves the woman unnamed, but we know it's Mary from the account in John 12. Here comes this woman, and Mark stresses the value of the perfume. He piles up these descriptions. It's an alabaster flask filled with this special perfume or ointment, and the ointment is of pure nard. This stuff would have been imported from India, so it was very expensive, as Mark mentions. And we find out just how expensive it is when the critics say to themselves, "this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii . . ."

Wow! A denarius is a day's wage. So 300 denarii would be almost a year's wages. We're talking about a large sum of money here! This is probably an heirloom that had been given to her. It was surely the most expensive thing she owned.

And what did she do with it? Did she take the cap off and pour out a drop on Jesus' head? No, in a very dramatic way, she broke the flask and emptied the entire thing to anoint Jesus. What a beautiful picture this is.

To offer some fragrant oil to dinner guests was a common courtesy. You have to remember, these folks didn't have the kind of access to showers that we have. And it's a hot climate. You can imagine what it might smell like to have a group of sweaty folks who haven't had a bath in quite awhile crammed inside your dining room. That's enough to spoil the party. So the host would offer some perfume to each person. You don't need a whole bottle

for each person, just a little bit. Just a little dab will do ya'. And then everyone can enjoy themselves at the party. It's a special occasion. It's a special dinner.

Last week when Stacy and I were getting ready to go out on a date, I put on some cologne. I don't wear cologne every day, but when Stacy and I are going to have some special time together, I put on some cologne. I don't put on a lot, just a little. There have been times when I've put on too much, and Stacy coughed and told me it was too much. So I just put on a little. But we were getting ready to leave on our date last Friday night, and our 3-year-old, Annalyse, who has a keen sense of smell, said, "You smell good, Daddy!" She could tell it was a special occasion. I appreciated the compliment, and it makes me think of how good the room must have smelled when this woman broke open an entire flask of pure nard.

There's another story I'm reminded of when I think about this. When I was in 10th grade I went on a trip with our youth group to San Antonio, TX. We were living in Michigan at the time, and our youth group drove in a couple of 15 passenger vans from Midland, Michigan to San Antonio, Texas. And if you've ever been on a trip like that, you know that a 15 passenger van packed with people for hours on end doesn't smell very pretty. You can roll the windows, but it's not going to help things that much, especially when you have a bunch of teenage boys eating Doritos and drinking Coke the whole time. It's just not a real pleasant odor.

Well, mid-way through this trip, something happened that was in stark contrast to the odor of the van. I was staying in a room with a couple of other guys, and one of the guys, Cory, who is still a good friend of mine today, he opened his suitcase to find a very nice smell arising from it, surprisingly (an overpowering smell, in fact). You see, Cory wasn't the best at packing a suitcase (I guess no teenage boy is). But Cory had basically balled up a bunch of clothes and thrown them into a suitcase, and somewhere in there he had also thrown a bottle of cologne, which now, we found, had broken. So in contrast to the smelly van, we now had Cory, who reeked of Calvin Klein cologne the rest of the trip.

Those memories, believe it or not, help me get inside the story of this dinner party at Bethany. You have a bunch of sweaty, stinky people packed inside a hot dining room. Food is being served. All kinds of odors and smells are hanging in the air. And then this woman comes in and breaks open an entire flask of expensive perfume. When the potent fragrance of this ointment was released, it would have far overpowered every other smell in the room.

Everything about this was stunning and surprising. It was shocking! They had the pleasant smell filling their nostrils. Their ears heard the sound of an alabaster flask shattering. And with their eyes they looked upon Jesus, who now had this oil running down from His head onto His whole body. It was a memorable event, to say the least.

And what does this so vividly display? It shows the beautiful devotion of this woman. She loved Jesus so much. She understood something of Jesus' infinite worth. So she went and got her most precious possession. She thought about what she had, what she could do, that would most honor Jesus.

What should this look like in our lives? What should this look like in my life? That's the question we should each be asking ourselves. For this woman, considering who she was and what she had, and considering her moment in history, this was the perfect way for her to express her absolute devotion to Jesus. What is it going to look like for you and me? It will be different for each of us. We're all different, we have different gifts and talents, different kinds of possessions, different vocations, different spheres of influence, different opportunities.

I challenge you to think seriously this week about how to make your life an extravagant display of devotion to Jesus. What kinds of things can you do? What sacrifices can you make? What risks can you take, that will show how much Jesus is worth in your life?

Now, the question that precedes that is the question I raised earlier. What are you ultimately devoted to? If the central object of worship in your life is something other than Jesus, then you cannot do this. If you're not ultimately devoted to Jesus, then you can't make your life an extravagant display of devotion to Him. Anything you might do, any sacrifice, any risk, would only be an outward display of religion. It wouldn't be heartfelt.

This reminds us that the miracle of new birth is absolutely necessary in our lives. God has to regenerate us. He has to invade our lives and give us a new heart so that we can see what is truly valuable, so that we can see Jesus as worthy of our highest devotion. I hope you understand this point. This is not just about *doing* something extravagant for Jesus, or doing something that will hopefully be seen as really sacrificial. That's not the point. If it's merely on that level, it will be legalism. I don't want any of us going out of here today saying, "Oh, I better go do something really beautiful for Jesus . . . get it over with. Do my duty, fulfill my obligation. Then I can go do the ugly things I like so much." That's our sinful nature. And that's how legalism works.

But the beauty of what this woman does for Jesus is not merely in what she does. The real beauty is in the fact that she

delights to do this. She's not doing this reluctantly. She's not doing this half-heartedly. She's not viewing this as a sacrifice at all. She's doing this because it brings her great joy to express her love for Jesus. She's never been so excited about any idea in all her life. She could have saved that flask of ointment for a rainy day, for a family emergency. It was worth a year's wages, after all. It represented financial security. It represented material possessions. There are all kinds of things she could have done with it, all kinds of ways it could have benefitted her or others. But none of those other options would have brought her nearly as much delight.

That's how I want to be. That's how I want us to be. Not only willing, but eager, passionate, to give ourselves entirely to Jesus, to make our very lives an offering to Him, to hold nothing back, but to take everything we have, everything that is most precious to us, and bring it to Jesus and say, "This is for You! Nothing would bring me more pleasure than for you to have all of this, all of me."

It might start with something as simple as saying, "Jesus, spending time with you is more important to me than watching all of my favorite TV shows. I would rather turn the TV off and spend time in Your Word and prayer." Then, as you're studying the Word and praying for God to show you how to invest your life, you can be thinking about how to make your life a beautiful offering to Jesus.

God made each of us unique. He made each one of us differently so that we can show the worth of Jesus in various ways. So it's not going to look the same for each of us, and this is part of the beauty of God's design. In many different ways, we will express our devotion to Jesus and show that Jesus is worth more than our most precious earthly possessions.

For some of us, this will mean packing up and going to Africa or the Middle East or some other place where there are great needs and where there are unreached people groups. Roger and Cathy Chesebro are leaving tomorrow to move back to Nairobi, Kenya. Ken and Jen Hovis will be moving to Qatar in just a few weeks. Stephen and Sarah Kline are in the process of being appointed with the International Mission Board. For these folks, God has made it clear to them that this is His will for them at this time. This is what it looks like for them to break the flask of perfume and give it to Jesus.

For others, it will look different. For many of us, it will mean staying here in Pittsburgh and ministering to various needs here and sharing the Gospel with unbelievers here. How can you use your money, how can you use your time, how can you step out of your comfort zone, how can you take risks and make sacrifices,

that show to everyone around you that Jesus is worth more to you than anything else in the whole world? Oh, I pray that God will revive us and give us that passionate delight in Him so that we won't be bound by earthly comforts and securities but can offer everything to Him.

A Disciples' Hideous Devotion to Himself

In contrast to this beautiful devotion, let's look now at the opposite. We're all devoted to something. In this passage we see that Judas is radically devoted to something other than Jesus. He's looking out for himself. He's looking for selfish gain. And his radical pursuit of that leads him to betray Jesus.

It starts with the reaction to what Mary has done for Jesus. Mark 14:4 says, "There were some who said to themselves indignantly, 'Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they scolded her." In the parallel passage in Matthew 26 it identifies the disciples as the ones who were indignant at this. And in the parallel in John 12 it says this: "But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?'" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it." (John 12:4-6, ESV)

It's interesting to see here how the Gospel accounts complement one another and give us different details of the story. You can picture how the scene unfolded. For Judas, Mary's action was wasteful, because he would rather have the 300 denarii in the moneybag where he could have access to it. We can only guess at the motives of the other disciples in their criticism, but it seems to be the case where a little complaining encourages more complaining. The others found themselves agreeing with Judas, and then voicing the same opinion. Yeah, what a waste!

Judas is the antithesis of Mary. He is holding onto the moneybag, which is so precious to him, ready to deny his own Master to get some more money. In verses 10-11 Judas becomes the answer to the hopes and plans of the chief priests. Remember back in verses 1-2 the chief priests and scribes are brainstorming about how to arrest Jesus and kill Him without causing an uproar from the people. Judas Iscariot is just the one to help them do this.

See how hideous Judas's devotion is. He is so devoted to himself that he will betray his own master, the One he has followed for 3 years, the One who has taught him and been so kind to him. Judas now turns his back on Jesus and prepares to turn Jesus over to be killed. Mark makes sure we understand who this

Judas Iscariot is. Verse 10 emphasizes that he was one of the twelve. Make no mistake, this treachery comes from within the inner circle. He's one of the twelve.

And then notice the reaction of the chief priests when they heard what Judas was willing to do. Verse 11 says they were glad and promised to give him money. What a stark contrast this is to the woman who gladly gave her most valuable possession as a gift to Jesus. Here we have men who are so devoted to themselves, to their own religious power, that they're willing to part with a considerable amount of money in order to have Jesus killed.

This is the opposite of beautiful. It's hideous, repulsive, disgusting. The most wonderful Person who has ever walked the face of the earth is in their midst, and all they want to do is hang Him on a cross.

Jesus' Beautiful Devotion to His People

Look at the way Jesus sticks up for Mary in verse 6. She has been scolded by Judas and the others for this wasteful act. But Jesus has a different take on it. He says, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." Jesus views this as something beautiful. He does not see it as wasteful or foolish or impractical. He sees it as wonderful, beautiful, good. It is perfectly fitting for this moment.

Regarding the comment about giving to the poor Jesus responds in verse 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." Now, this is not to be taken as indifference toward the poor. That's not the point at all. It is clear in Scripture that God cares about the poor, and we should, too. But when Jesus is physically in your midst and He's about to die on the cross, this is the appropriate use of the costly ointment.

I think this is similar to the occasion when Jesus was at the house with Mary and Martha, and Martha was frustrated that Mary was just sitting at Jesus' feet. That account is recorded at the end of Luke 10. Do you remember what Jesus said? "But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10:41-42, ESV)

Isn't that basically the same as what He says about Mary in Mark 14 as well? He's not saying that serving is unimportant. He's not saying that caring for the poor is unimportant. What He's saying is, To sit at His feet and to express our heartfelt devotion to Him is more important than anything else we could do. So before you jump up and start serving. Before you throw yourself into various ministries and programs and causes, check your heart.

Have you chosen the good portion? Are you satisfied in Jesus, Himself? Do you delight just to be in His presence? Do you delight to offer Him the totality of who you are? Mary seized her moment. What's your moment? What's your opportunity?

Jesus says of her in Mark 14:8, "She has done what she could." We shouldn't read that in a demeaning way, like "that's *all* she could do." He's saying, rather, "she gave everything." It's similar to His comment about the poor widow at the end of chapter 12, when He said, "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Like the poor widow, Mary gave her best, she gave it all. And that is beautiful in the sight of Jesus.

Then Jesus points to the real significance of Mary's action. Mark 14:8, "she has anointed my body beforehand for burial." Jesus has already predicted His own death in chapters 8, 9, and 10, but nobody seems to be thinking about that. But in the providence of God, this woman anoints Jesus in preparation for burial. This points us to an even more beautiful devotion, which is Jesus' devotion to His people. He is on His way to the cross to die for His people. He is preparing for His imminent death and burial.

But His comments don't stop there. In verse 9 He looks beyond the grave to the resurrection and the proclamation of the gospel. And He looks down through the corridors of time and delights in the fact that as the gospel goes out to the whole world, the story of this woman will also be told in memory of her.

I hope we're inspired this morning by this portrait of beautiful devotion. I hope we're convicted by Judas's hideous devotion to himself. And I hope we're comforted and encouraged by the great devotion of our Lord Jesus Christ who went to the cross for our sin, and rose on the third day, and whose gospel is proclaimed even in our midst this morning. He is worthy of our praise and honor and total devotion.