

## Jesus Anointed at Bethany

Mark 14:1–11

Mark has had us near the close of Jesus' earthly ministry since Ch 11. We saw him enter Jerusalem on his way to inspect the temple. The religious leaders failed that inspection. In Ch 12 the leaders set up a series of public traps to trip up Jesus in what he said. He foiled their traps. Jesus prepares us for days of extreme difficulty ahead in his farewell discourse by teaching on persecution, end time prophecies, and final judgment in Ch 13. Mark is not writing on a strict timeline; not all of those teachings occurred during the week of Jesus' passion. But as we get to Ch 14, he makes the timeline clear so that we know we are early in the week of Passover celebration. The week of Passover actually had two feasts merged together: the Passover feast, and the feast of unleavened bread. Huge crowds were pouring into Jerusalem bringing their Pascal lambs for Passover sacrifice. Jesus is in the village of Bethany, about as far outside of Jerusalem as the Dillons where Elisabeth works is from where we are — just a couple of miles. We are days from his arrest, mock trial, and crucifixion. His substitutionary death for the sin of the world is eminent. The disciples' faith still needs much growth. But a woman of faith shows us what it looks like to love God whole-heartedly.

**Mark 14:1–11** — 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, <sup>2</sup> for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. <sup>9</sup> 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."

<sup>10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. <sup>11</sup> And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

**PRAY**

## 2

This is another Markan sandwich, as we have come to know them. The two pieces of bread on the outside of the sandwich show us the murderous intent of both the religious leaders and of one of Jesus followers. In vv 1–2, the chief priest and the scribes are seeking to arrest and kill Jesus. This is the culmination of their ongoing murder plot that Mark first records in 3:6. Then in vv 10–11 we have Judas Iscariot seeking to betray him. So the sandwich deals with the plot to put him to death.

On the top part of the sandwich we see the religious leaders giving in to one of their favorite sins: the fear of man. As you have studied through the Gospel of John in your small groups, you have noticed John tell us directly that they were motivated by the praise of men and by the love of their places and position. Here they are calculating to kill him in light of those same sinful bents. They want the approval of men so they don't want to arrest Jesus during the feast — the people may turn against them. Seeking the approval of God is not in their heart. They are actually agents who will carry out what Jesus has already foretold three times since Ch 8: that he will be given over to the religious leaders who will kill him. Though their murderous hearts lead them to think they are clever in their conspiracy, let's be reminded that they do not take his life. Jesus lays it down willingly.

The bottom piece of this murderous sandwich is in vv 10–11. Judas Iscariot has been one of Jesus' followers. But love for God still does not motivate him; love of money does. His ongoing sin of theft remains in the driver's seat. Again, John tells us that he used to help himself to what was in the treasurer's purse. Here he is seeking to gain, one more time, some profit from his connection with Jesus. He earns it by betraying the Lord.

These murderers are filled with contempt for God and plot to control and eliminate him rather than submit to him. Their scheme to slaughter of the Lamb of God is in motion. As Jerusalem fills with people and Pascal lambs for the Passover feast, the final Passover lamb who takes away the sin of the world, who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many — he is about to be anointed and prepared for burial through an extraordinary act of worship and sacrificial love by a woman who believes who he is and what he taught.

Now we get to the meat of the sandwich. As Mark writes, what happens in the middle helps us understand what is going on in the pieces of bread. In contrast to the faithless contempt of the conspirators, Mark takes us to the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany to show us what love for God looks like, and, as only God's word can, reveal in our own hearts where we fall short.

### 3

We really don't know much about Simon the leper except that he's not currently a leper. If he had active leprosy, he would not have been allowed in the town or around people — so he has obviously been healed of his leprosy. We can assume his healing was one of the many miracles that Jesus performed that was not specifically recorded in the Gospels. We have some understanding about what the scenario around the table would look like because of cultural customs. This was a gathering of men for a meal. The guests are likely Jesus and his disciples. There may have been others there, but we are not told with certainty. Into this men's dinner comes a woman. This is actually scandalous. The only reason women would've been there would've been as servers. Conversations around the table, however many, would have stopped when she entered. Heads would have turned. All eyes would have been on this outsider.

Her presence in the room would've been enough to garner looks of disapproval. But this woman is on mission— that's apparent from what is in her hands — and she doesn't care about their approval. Her Lord is on his way to die as a ransom for many at the hands of the religious leaders and Judas. She is carrying a flask carved from alabaster, a white stone often used for carving fine vessels. The flask would have held 12 to 16 ounces. It contained an extremely expensive perfume called *nard*, an valued imported from India. The flask itself had value as a piece of art, but the large volume of perfume it contained cost about a year's wages. A day's wage was about 1 denarius. v 5 says it was worth more than 300 denarii. It would've been unusual for a woman to have that kind of earning power. It was likely a family heirloom — money had been saved and collected over time, perhaps over more than a generation until there was enough money to purchase the item.

As unusual as it was to have a woman enter the room, as perplexing as it must've been to see her with the flask, what happens next shows us what faith in God and love for God looks like. It's going to expose every heart in the room. Indeed, I pray it will expose every heart in this room. As she approaches Jesus, she smashes the top of that expensive container and begins to pour out its extremely expensive contents onto the head of the Lord Jesus. This may seem odd to us, but anointing the head with oil was a sign of blessing. It was also part of the process of burial as they honored their dead. We will deal more with her in a minute, but as that, fragrant, sacrificial, offering, begins to permeate the room, let's see what the response is to her wholehearted act of worship.

One would hope that by now these disciples who had been with Jesus for 3 years or longer would understand that the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, is God and is worthy of worship. They have been

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present while he taught on the Greatest Commandment: Love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. There's no indication they get it at all.

As they see this unfold, they calculate that what she has done is too greater a value to pour out on the Lord. They apparently have determined what an acceptable level of love and worship of the Lord is, and she has exceeded it. The heart problem is that they know the cost of the perfume, but not the worth of the Lord. They say she is wasteful; her devotion needs to be moderated — like theirs, we can assume they mean. Other things could have been done with the money, like feeding the poor. So they want to virtue signal about their knowledge of the law and its requirement to care for the poor.

***Aren't we supposed to feed the poor?*** Yes, loving our neighbors and caring for the poor is part of the law. Indeed, it is the second greatest commandment. But there is a first commandment that is prioritized. Love of God is prioritized over love of others. As Jesus places himself in priority over the poor it is another expression of his deity. Let's be carefully here: it is not either/or; it is both/and. But God is the priority. He will tolerate nothing placed before him. They have a higher value for the poor than they do for Jesus.

As they watch her hold nothing back in her love and worship for Jesus, and they are enraged. The end of v 5 says they scolded her. That's a weak translation. They were flaring their nostrils with angry indignation. Her whole-hearted faith and devotion have exposed their half-hearted commitment. Their ilk have been around a long time.

There is an acceptable religion that does not require heart-changing devotion. There is a respectable religion that does not embrace reproach for Christ's sake, and even condemns it. It seems that there are always those who are comfortable with measured religion. They despise those who take the Great Commandment seriously and pour out love without measure. And that "denying oneself" — that's just a poetic metaphor. ***I'll deny an appetite or two, — perhaps for Lent — but I'll not deny myself at the root level. That's extremism. That's fanaticism. God doesn't expect that.***

Hanging out with Jesus, as they had been doing, is not the same as loving, obeying and worshiping Jesus. Rather than taking up their cross to follow Christ, they are confident he is OK with their half-hearted, measured-out devotion. They can decide what an acceptable level of love and faith looks like. Careful and balanced commitment is prudent. They are so disoriented to who Jesus is and where he is going that they have no joy in what she has done. This kind of over-the-top act of

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worship is a waste in their eyes. ***We could have bought an impressive number of sandwiches for the poor! That might have gone viral on TikTok. That would be good PR for us.***

If you're satisfied with being religious rather than being abandoned to Christ, perhaps it's not Christ that you want, but a good reputation. They seem content with a religion that signals virtue but leaves them in charge of how they live and what they value. There is little appetite for life change or whole-hearted sacrifice. That is too much. That's fanatical. Let's consider her for just a moment.

This woman — John tells us she is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus — she comes as close as anyone in the Scriptures to fulfilling the Great Commandment. Her love for the Lord is so unbounded that she risks all of her financial investment. She didn't simply remove the lid – she smashed the top. There's no going back. There's no way to moderate what she is pouring out on the Lord. Her social credibility is trashed because she dared invade this men's meal. She has heard him teach that he's going to the cross. She believes him — this is preparation for that. She has determined to serve the Lord on his mission to redeem the world with no hold backs.

Such love for God will not be perceived in a favorable light by others who do not love him in this way. Perhaps it exposes their lack of devotion. Perhaps in unbelief they simply think it is foolish. Whatever they think, they will hold the one who loves God with their whole heart in contempt. They will insult. They will mock. They will deride. They will seek to cancel. But what does it matter to the one who truly loves God. Take a lesson from her. She is not governed by what the religiously reserved think. She seeks to worship and love Christ. And it is **his** approval that she receives. **You** seek the **same**.

Being a Christian is not an appearance to be maintained, an argument to be won, or a doctrine to be embraced. It is not what I can get from Christ, though it is indeed what he gives me that transforms my life and shapes my affections and values. Being a Christian is to believe, love, and obey Christ! Doctrine correctly describes our God and causes us to know the fullness of who he is. But if all we do is garner an orthodox head knowledge of God, our hearts remain in a perilous place.

Now Jesus rebukes the halfhearted guests. Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me, says the Lord. She has been captivated, not by dusty earthly costs, but the infinite worth and beauty of Christ. She anointed his body in advance for burial. What an extraordinary act of faith and worship! The men were virtue signaling over the costly ointment. It could've been sold and given to the poor!

## 6

Loving God with a whole heart doesn't mean you won't be insulted or persecuted. It just means that you don't have to worry about it. The Lord defended her, and he will do so for all who love him. Indeed, love in this abandoned way blazes the trail for others who would seek to love God in this way. Jesus says that what she has done will be remembered. And here we are, remembering it. As she models love, we see what it will cost us. Her self-forgetful abandon exposes our self-protecting holdbacks. The only approval she needed was the approval she received. Man looks on the outward appearance. God looks on the heart. And he sees a heart that loves him with no holdbacks, no reservations, and no regrets. And he commends this God-glorifying love.

Let's imagine the hypothetical that did not happen. Let's say that, even though her heart desired to serve the Lord, her fear of others overrode the inclination to serve Christ. Imagine the internal conversation in such a scenario. It's the meeting of men; they will despise me if I interrupt it. Everyone knows this is very expensive. It took a long time to acquire it – a lot of blood, sweat and tears. They will think I am foolish, and it will be a shame to me and my family for the foreseeable future. If I do go in and anoint him as though he was literally being buried, that will involve a very public display of affection. They will say that I am an immoral woman who throws herself at men. Let's imagine that she had given into that, and so doing she gained the approval of everyone at that table. Which of those who approved of her moderate her worship has the capacity to give her life? Which of those who embrace a restrained, moderated love has the capacity to forgive her sin. The best that they can offer is the approval of those who die without knowing what it means to love God.

- Does your love for God follow the pattern she has set? Self-forgetting, abandoned, and sacrificial... Let's be exposed by the purity of her love.
- Let's be gripped by the truth that this level of love is achievable.
- Let's be shaped by the direction that Christ's sacrificial love expressed on the cross, demands my soul, my life, my all.

If you want to love God, as she did, you must know the reality of his death for your sin and his life-giving resurrection. God demonstrated his love for us in this, that, while we were still sinners, Christ died. His surpassing, love and grace and forgiveness is the only thing that will motivate this kind of love from us. Believe this and move from death to life, and from satisfied religion to whole-hearted worship.

PRAY