

That scene from the movie *The Perfect Storm* provides a good summary of the last week of Jesus' life. A malevolent storm of growing hostility has been brewing in Jerusalem...vv. 1-2. The hatred shown toward Jesus is matched only by the treachery and betrayal of one of Jesus' disciples...vv. 10-11. In between these verses is a tender story that serves as the eye of the storm. In Mark 14 the sun breaks through the storm clouds and makes a brief appearance as we witness one of the most extravagant acts of love recorded in the pages of scripture. In fact Jesus declared that wherever the Gospel is preached this story will be told as a memorial to Mary's selfless expression of love. What did she do to earn such praise and admiration from Jesus? What do we need to learn from her? How can we make a favorable impression on Jesus?

Jesus and His disciples gathered with friends at the home of Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3). There was a dinner given in Jesus honor. Mary and Martha and Lazarus were there. This is after the raising of Lazarus from the dead so it must have made for some interesting conversation. "How was your week Lazarus?" "It seemed to just fly by." "Well you know what they say, time flies when you're dead." During dinner, Mary brought out a pound of perfume and we discover some distinguishing features of extravagant love:

1. Extravagant love is not self-conscious. That should be self-evident since the definition of love is placing the welfare of another before our own. Love is caring for another with no thought to myself. Mary didn't think about how she might look to others. She was always at the feet of Jesus. When He visited her home, Mary sat at His feet and listened to Him while Martha busied herself with details. When Mary met Jesus on the road following Lazarus' death she fell at His feet. And here she is again. In the position of a servant doing what a servant did. This becomes even more compelling when a few days after this Jesus' disciples are unwilling to wash His feet as they entered the upper room.

Verse 3 says she poured this costly oil over Jesus' head. John reports that she also wiped His feet with her hair. What appears to be a tender scene to us would have been shocking to a Jew in the time of Christ. Women wore their hair tightly bound and never let it down in public. Only women with bad reputations wore their hair down. But Mary wasn't thinking about herself. Love is not self-conscious.

When we are self-conscious we look for ways to demonstrate love that will not make us uncomfortable. We only love the lovely or the lovable. True love is measured by the extent to which we are willing to love those who can't do anything for us. When we love in order to be loved in return, that kind of love is unsurprising and therefore unremarkable. But the quality of Mary's love was different.

There are different kinds of love. When it comes to love, English is a poor servant. We only have one word for love whereas there are several in Greek.

Physical love (eros) is a love based on mutual attraction.

Brotherly love (phile) is a love based on common interests.

Motherly love (storge) is based on natural affection.

But the biblical writers introduced a new word into the Greek language in order to describe a love that can only be experienced through a relationship with Christ. It is agape love.

Extravagant love. Unconditional love. Love without limits. Love without conditions. Everyone

expects to find physical love and brotherly love and motherly love but agape love is unexpected and undeserved and therefore undeniable.

2. Extravagant love is not cost-conscious. 300 denarii = one year's wages. Nard is an aromatic herb commonly produced in the high pasturelands of the Himalayas between Tibet and India and carried by camel from this remote region to Palestine. The difficulty of obtaining this perfume explains why it was so costly.

Mary used it all. The perfume was kept in an alabaster vial. Alabaster is a translucent white material made from Gypsum. Mary broke the vial. Once it was broken it could not be resealed. She couldn't use a little and then put the rest in a tupperware container. She had no intention of saving any of the stuff. As a result of her extravagance the whole house was filled with the fragrance of spikenard.

Ann Ortlund makes a beautiful application of this verse... "Christians file into church on a Sunday morning. One by one by one they march in – like separate alabaster vases. Contained. Self-sufficient. Encased. Individually complete. Contents undisclosed. No perfume emitting at all. Their vases aren't bad looking. In fact, some of them are the Beautiful People, and they become Vase-Conscious; conscious of their own vase and of one another's. They're aware of clothes, of personalities, of position in this world – of exteriors. So before and after church (maybe during) they're apt to talk Vase talk. Mary broke her vase. Broke it?! How controversial. Was everybody doing it? Was it a vase-breaking party? No, she just did it all by herself. What happened then? The obvious: all the contents were forever released. She could never hug her precious nard to herself again."

Notice the response of the disciples. (vv. 4-5). John tells us that it was Judas who was the ring leader in condemning Mary's actions. The disciples still have a lot to learn about love. In contrast to Mary's costly act their attitude is striking. Why would they discourage such a beautiful act? They are still self-conscious. Self-consciousness kills love. Notice how they make their objections sound noble. "What a waste. This money could have gone to the poor." That sounds reasonable. They loved Jesus with a reasonable love. That is the only kind of love some people are capable of. Some people know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.

Jesus' reaction in vv. 6-9 must have shocked the disciples who were feeling pretty smug as they joined Judas in his criticism. Jesus defended Mary's actions as not only thoughtful but timely.

3. Extravagant love is time-conscious. Mary had insight into God's plan that the disciples didn't yet demonstrate. She was a student of Jesus. Her time spent at His feet now paid off. So Jesus says, "She has anointed me beforehand for my burial." Mary knew that Jesus would soon die to pay the penalty for sin and to purchase a place in heaven for all who believe.

She demonstrated a sensitivity the disciples didn't have. She listened not only with her ears but with her heart. She sensed the heaviness Jesus felt. He says in effect, "Mary is the only one sensitive enough to recognize that not only am I not going to be with you much longer but my death will be a violent one. I will be treated like a criminal and won't receive the respectful treatment others receive in death." And so Jesus says, "She did what she could."

What could you do? Let me suggest a response of generosity. When storms threaten our future our minds focus on scarcity. Fear causes us to tighten our grip on everything. Love does just the opposite. It is counterintuitive. The reason Jesus is blown away by Mary is that she does not let fear win. She opens her heart and responds to these circumstances not by battening down the hatches of her heart but by pouring out what she has in an act of single-minded devotion to Jesus. And it is beautiful to behold.

Let's not forget that Mary is admired and honored by Jesus not because she tried to fix the brokenness of this world. That's a guy thing. In our attempts to diagnose the problems in this fallen world we can easily overlook that the most rational response to depravity is to focus on the things that matter most. So what can we do?

1. Be generous with your time. We all have the same 168 hours this week, no more, no less. What will you do with it? This is a busy season. Before you jump on the treadmill and race around from store to store and party to party stop and think about how much time you will spend just sitting at the feet of Jesus. While you're there, ask Him who needs a little time with you.

2. Be generous with what you have been given. Coats/blankets, Thanksgiving offering.

Every once in a while, in the midst of the storm, you get a glimpse of what matters most. During one of the 2012 Republican presidential debates, most of the candidates were furiously writing notes to remind themselves of points they wanted to make when they were called on. Rick Santorum noticed that Rick Perry wasn't writing very much. During the debate, Santorum told of his daughter Bella's tremendous health challenges. She was born with Trisomy 18, a genetic condition that requires constant care. Just 10% of children with this condition make it to their first birthday. Bella just turned 7. After the debate ended, all the candidates shook hands. As Santorum walked over to Perry to shake his hand he glanced down at the note pad Perry had been using. There were just three words on the pad: "Pray for Bella."

I don't know Rick Perry. I know a few things about him. But I do know the most important things about us are the secret things, the things that the cameras never see. So tomorrow, when no one is looking, offer your life to Jesus as an act of loving devotion.