Mark Lesson 46 (2023)

**JESUS ANOINTED AT BETHANY**

*(Subtitle: A Profound Act of Love)*

Mark 14:1-11

Key Verse: 14:6 & 8

“‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’” “She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.”

This morning, we will reflect on a passage about a remarkable woman who, in a dramatic act of love, expressed her devotion to Jesus. As we engage with this passage, may we be inspired to examine our hearts and learn how to express our love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Verses 1-2 set the stage for today’s event. Look at verses 1-2. “Now the Passover and the Festival of the Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. ‘But not during the festival, they said, ‘or the people may riot.’” The Passover commemorated the Israelites’ liberation from Egypt when God passed over homes marked by the blood of a lamb. (Ex. 12) The day of Passover was followed by a seven-day celebration called the *“Feast of the Unleavened Bread.”* Over time, the eight days came to be called “*the Passover Feast.”* The Jews could observe the Passover only in Jerusalem (Deut. 16:5-6). All Jewish males over the age of twelve were required to go to Jerusalem for the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Deut. 16:16). The population of Jerusalem during the Passover increased from 50,000 to 250,000. (Pic#1)

The Jewish leaders, notably the chief priests and teachers of the law, had been searching for an opportune moment to eliminate Jesus. Yet, they were cautious of acting during the Passover, fearing the crowd who favored Jesus would riot on his behalf. Their intent was likely to arrest Jesus after the festival. However, Judas’ unexpected betrayal of Jesus resented an irresistible opportunity, as detailed in verses 10-11.

In verses 3-9, Mark narrates a beautiful story of a woman’s anointing of Jesus in Bethany, offering a stark contrast to Judas’ betrayal. Look at verse 3. “While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.” Bethany, located on the easter slop of the Mount of Olives, was home to Jesus’ friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha (Jn. 11:2). Probably, when Jesus had returned to Bethany from Jerusalem, he and his disciples stayed at their house. One day, Jesus was a guest in the home of Simon the Leper; presumably a former leper miraculously healed by Jesus.

What happened at his house? As everyone dined and reclined, a woman entered, bearing an alabaster jar containing costly pure nard of perfume. She broke the jar and lavishly anointed Jesus’ head. The woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. (Jn. 12:1-8) In those days, anointing a guest’s head with oil was customary, but not with such expensive oil. This extravagant anointing, with expensive oil pouring on the head, paralleled the royal anointing ceremony during a king’s coronation. I heard that before the Coronation of King Charles of England, holy oil was made in Jerusalem, and King Charles was anointed with that sacred oil. (Pic# 2&3)

Mary’s anointing of Jesus was costly, worth a year’s wages of an ordinary worker, at least $ 30,000- 40,000, according to a rough estimation in our currency. This precious nard of perfume was likely intended for her future marriage, possibly a cherished family treasure. (Pic#4) Yet, she didn’t hesitate to pour it on Jesus’ head, not just a few drops but the whole jar. John’s account indicates that she poured the perfume on Jesus’ head and feet. She undoubtedly whispered words of love and adoration during this act, filling the house with the fragrance of her devotion, *“Thank you, Jesus. I love you and adore you!”* It was her act of genuine love and gratitude.

However, most dinner quests reacted negatively to her actions. What response did she get? Look at verses 4-5. “Some of those who were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.’ And they rebuked her harshly.” While Judas Iscariot wasn’t mentioned here, other Gospel accounts identify him as the primary objector. (Mt. 26:8-9; Jn. 12:4-6). Judas was the one who seemed to have led this objection. And his motivation was not his concern for the poor but his love for money. Judas, who held the money for Jesus’ ministry and had embezzled from it before (Jn.12:6), likely sought to sell the perfume for personal gain.

It appears that other disciples shared Judas’ sentiment, scolding Mary harshly. *“What a waste, lady?”* Their reaction echoed, *“Senseless!”* The disciples could see no reason for the waste they had just seen. She had just wasted a lot of money. In one sense, the disciples had a point – selling the perfume could have fed many hungry people. But it was too late; the perfume had already been poured and wasted.

Mary’s sincere and sacrificial act of love was profoundly misunderstood even by Jesus’ own disciples, who accused her harshly. Their harsh words of rebuke might have left Mary feeling embarrassed, disheartened, and hurt, wondering if she had done something wrong. It reminds me of the adage, “*Never speak harshly in anger, for anger fades, but harsh words can scar for a lifetime. Choose to use kind words or be silent.”*

In verses 6-8, Jesus swiftly defended Mary’s act and explained its significance. Look at verse 6. “‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’” Jesus, our Lord, defended Mary by rebuking his disciples for their harsh rebuke. He commanded them to leave her alone and stop bothering her. Then Jesus went on to declare that Mary had done a beautiful thing to him. Jesus both approved and praised her action as beautiful and lovely.

Before delving into the deeper meaning of Mary’s act, Jesus mentioned helping the people experiencing poverty. Look at verse 7. “The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.’” Jesus did not suggest neglecting those in financial need. Instead, he signified that opportunities to assist the poor would persist while his presence with them was limited, given his impending death.

In verses 8-9, Jesus clarified her action from a spiritual perspective. Read verses 8 and 9. “She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” While Mary might not have consciously anointed Jesus for his burial, her act likely sprang up from deep intuition or spiritual insight. She may not have understood Jesus’ impending death more than the disciples did, but she might have sensed something dangerous would happen to Jesus. In response, she expressed her love and gratitude by offering her most precious gift.

Mary’s love and devotion deeply moved Jesus, prompting him to interpret her anointing as preparation for his imminent death and burial. This is significant because it’s one of the rare cases in the Gospels where Jesus explicitly mentioned his impending death and burial.

Why is Jesus’ death and burial so significant? Because his path to becoming the King of kings and Lord of lords differed from worldly rulers’. It involved his sacrificial death on the cross, shedding his blood as a ransom for the world's sins. Despite being the Son of God, he would face rejection, endure suffering and shame on the cross, and ultimately rise from the dead.

Mary’s anointing of Jesus held profound personal significance for him. That’s why he declared she had done a beautiful thing to him. He also foresaw that her story of genuine, sacrificial love for him would not be forgotten but continue to inspire generations, as he stated in verse 9, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Let’s turn to verses 10 and 11. “Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So, he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.” While Judas’ motive for betraying Jesus is not explicitly mentioned in Mark, it’s well-known that he sought personal gain.

As mentioned in verses 1 and 2, the Jewish religious leaders initially planned to act after the Passover. Judas’ unexpected offer, however, expedited their evil intentions. Tragically, Judas’ betrayal played a role in the timely fulfillment of God’s divine plan. Despite Jesus’ deep love for him, Judas became the one who would betray him, leading Jesus to say later, “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” (Mark 14.21)

We witness a stark contrast between Mary and Judas Iscariot in today's passage. Judas Iscariot serves as a regrettable example for Christian disciples. His criticism of Mary, with his ulterior motives, highlights his opportunistic character. When circumstances didn’t align with his expectations, he betrayed Jesus, demonstrating a nature guided by personal gain rather than unwavering principles.

On the other hand, Mary was an outstanding model for Christian disciples. Her anointing of Jesus with costly perfume represents genuine love, demotion, and worship. Her act reminds me of Romans 12:1, which states, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.”

By the way, why does Mark contrast Judas with Mary? Because it’s often easier for us to embrace opportunism, like Judas, than to emulate devoted discipleship, like Mary’s.

Contemporary society often promotes self-interest and opportunism as virtues. It is disheartening to witness many individuals embracing opportunistic behavior, seemingly prioritizing their desires above all else. This inclination is not entirely surprising, as humans tend to be egocentric. This implies that our default motivation often leans toward self-interest rather than genuine love for God and others. What shall we do then? It’s obvious. We must follow the universal life principle advocated by Jesus, who claimed, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it.” (8:34-35)

Let us close this lesson by reading today’s key verses, Mark 14:6 and 8. “‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you brother her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’” (6) “She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.’” (8) Mary’s extravagant act of love for Jesus serves as a timeless example. It prompts us to examine our motives, actions, and words to discern whether they are driven by genuine love or self-interests.

May we strive to be authentic disciples of Christ, choosing devotion over personal gain. Rather than conforming to the pattern of this world, may we undergo a profound transformation by renewing our minds and dedicating our bodies as living sacrifices that are pleasing to God. In every aspect of our lives –eating, drinking, working, assisting those in need, or any endeavor – we should strive to carry out these actions with genuine love for God and his people. Such devotion pleases the Lord and fills our lives with contentment and fulfillment.