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Sermon Summary #42

Unashamed, Extravagant Affection for the Son of God Mark 14:1-11

The portrait of Jesus that Mark has sketched for us is truly stunning. Jesus, described by his enemies as the friend of sinners, was uninhibited in the presence lepers and unafraid to confront demonic spirits. He was unembarrassed by prostitutes and unimpressed by religious leaders. He is unoffended by your weaknesses, undeterred by your sin, and unashamed to call you his own. How do you respond to someone like this? Matt Redman asked the question in the lyrics to one of his songs: “What can be said, what can be done, to so faithful a friend, to so loving a King?”

Ask yourself this: “If I were to describe the depth and intensity of my devotion to Jesus, what words would I use?” Would you employ words like *exuberant*, *demonstrative*, *passionate*, *extravagant*? Or would your devotion to the Son of God be more accurately described as *measured*, *calculated*, *restrained*, *guarded*?

To help us understand the appropriate response to Jesus I want to look briefly at two people who knew him well. Both had seen Jesus heal the sick. They had watched with breathless wonder as he cleansed lepers of indescribable disfigurement. They had witnessed paralytics leap for joy for the first time in their lives. They scratched their heads in bewilderment as he restored sight to the blind with mud balls made from spit. Dead people came to life and demons ran for cover when the friend of sinners drew near.

Both had heard him preach the gospel of the kingdom of God. They may even have sat next to each other, occasionally looking to the other to see if they’d really heard what they thought they’d heard. The power of his words was beyond dispute. No one had ever spoken with such authority. Both had witnessed his compassion and love. They’d seen lives transformed and hope restored and dignity come alive. Yet their responses to him differed as life does from death. Who were they? One was a lady, named Mary. The other a man, Judas Iscariot.

They found themselves in Bethany, a village two miles east of Jerusalem; in the home of Simon, a man whom Jesus had healed of leprosy. One might not think it important to know when this incident occurred, but John tells us it was “six days before Passover”, in other words, probably on the Saturday night before Palm Sunday. In other words, the anointing at Bethany described here in vv. 3-9 actually occurred three or four days before the events recorded in vv. 1-2.

When matters because it sheds light on **what** happened. The **chronology** of this incident bears greatly on its **theology**. It tells us why this death of Jesus rather than all the others of his day or any day transformed history forever. **He is the sacrificial Passover Lamb of God.**

Why were they gathered in Simon’s house? Well, to eat dinner for one. But the party perhaps had deeper meaning. Simon may have arranged it as a way of thanking Jesus for healing him of leprosy. Who can fault him for that! Or perhaps they were celebrating Lazarus being alive and honoring Jesus for so remarkable a miracle. In any case, there were no fewer than fifteen men present: the 12 disciples, Jesus, Simon, and Lazarus; together with two women: Mary and her sister Martha.

Most agree that Jesus was anointed twice. An earlier anointing occurred in Galilee (Lk. 7:36-50). The anointing recorded here took place in Bethany. Although in both incidents a man named *Simon* is involved, it was such a common name that nothing should be deduced from it. The differences between the anointings are striking:

Luke

Mark

woman a sinner	woman was Mary
the host a Pharisee	the host was Simon the Leper
in Galilee	in Bethany
host criticizes woman	disciples criticize Mary

Mary's action, as described in v. 3, wasn't unusual or unexpected. Anointing people was a common thing in those days. Jesus himself was incredulous, and perhaps a bit offended, when Simon the Pharisee, failed to anoint him (Luke 7:46; cf. Psalms 23:5 and 141:5). What was unusual about Mary, indeed scandalous, was *the incalculable cost, the expense, the sheer financial extravagance of her devotion and love.*

The *alabaster flask* was a vial made of fine-grained gypsum from which the perfume was extracted by snapping off the long thin neck. Again, John identifies the content of the flask as "very expensive ointment", hard to be specific (John 12). Her gift amounted to 300 denarii, the equivalent of a year's wage for a working man! A full year's salary!

Where did Mary get this kind of expensive perfume? It's not the sort of thing a woman in that day would keep sitting on her dresser! Nothing in Scripture indicates that she and her family were *that* wealthy. Perhaps she inherited it, but I guess we'll never know. *Some wealthy people can perform extravagant acts of generosity and never feel the cost.* They never need to look at a price tag when shopping for clothes or hesitate to order a filet when it lists for \$35. But this perfume probably represented Mary's financial security. She was going to feel the financial impact of this decision for a long time to come. But she couldn't have cared less! There's no reason to think she ever paused to add up the expense. She never hesitated, worrying about how to pay the rent or the bills or how to finance her retirement.

Earlier Jesus had told his followers that he was soon to be delivered up to death. You would think his stunning prophecy would have knocked some spiritual sense into their heads. Yet his words seemed to fall on deaf ears. Did anyone hear him? Did anyone care? Mary did.

The reaction of the disciples was predictable. For a moment everyone must have sat in stunned silence, in utter disbelief of what they had just witnessed. "Did I just see what I think I saw?" they no doubt queried in their minds. Then they spoke out in angry denunciation (see vv. 4-5). In the first place, the perfume didn't belong to them! It was Mary's, and she was perfectly free to do with it whatever she pleased. So where do they get off taking her to task? There's no reason to think the disciples were motivated by greed or materialism. Nothing in their behavior indicated they wanted the money for themselves. They simply failed to realize the redemptive significance of what was taking place and the fact that the cross was just around the corner.

Their concern for the poor was actually sincere and genuine. In any other context it would have been perfectly appropriate. In fact, it was customary on the evening of Passover to take up an offering for the poor of one's community. This may well be what prompted their anger over what Mary had done. But according to John 12, Judas protested "not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it" (v. 6).

Jesus, in saying what he does in v. 7, is not unconcerned with the needs of the poor, and neither should we be. But there would be many more opportunities to attend to the cause of Christian charity whereas the earthly life of Jesus was almost at an end.

It is here that Matthew tells us something that Mark omits. According to Matthew 26:10 Jesus was "aware" of what the disciples were saying to themselves about her. How did Jesus become "aware" (v. 10) of what was being said? Did he overhear their conversation? Did the Spirit reveal this to him, as had happened on numerous other occasions? The least likely explanation is that Mary came to him burdened by their criticism and complained at how she was being mistreated. I honestly don't think she could have cared less what they thought or said. We'll see why in a moment. Whatever the case, Jesus indicates that she had an intuitive appreciation for the meaning of his impending death. The stunning thing for all of us to note is that what the

disciples thought was “waste” Jesus declares “beautiful”!

Was Mary *conscious* of the theological importance of her act? She had to be, or Jesus would not have commended her for it. Remember: *in the three most prominent scenes in which Mary appears she is always at the feet of Jesus, either to listen and learn, or to love and receive comfort.*

Now, why did I include vv. 10-11 in this story? Would it not have been more fitting to end on the high note of v. 9? Perhaps, but I want us to think in terms of the contrast between Mary and Judas. We don't know what motivated Judas. Everyone has a theory: jealousy? disappointment? wounded pride? greed?

What's important is how their response to Jesus reveals in starkly contrasting colors the nature of their devotion to him. It's not different for us. Look closely and let the contradiction between the two stir your soul.

- For Mary, no price is too high to expend on Jesus. For Judas, any price will do in exchange for him.
- For Mary, the worth of Jesus is immeasurable. For Judas, 30 pieces of silver will do just fine, thank you very much.
- Mary acted in humility and bowed in his presence to serve him. Judas acted in haughtiness and rose up to sell him.
- Mary determined what she might give as an expression of love for Jesus. Judas determined what he might get in exchange for Jesus.
- To Judas, Jesus was nothing but livestock to be sold at auction. To Mary, Jesus was truly livestock of a sort: the precious Lamb of God prepared for slaughter.
- Mary saw Jesus as the one whose spiritual worth evoked sweet gratitude. Judas saw Jesus as the one whose material worth evoked selfish greed.
- As an expression of her devotion, Mary believed in him. As an expression of his deceit, Judas betrayed him.
- For Mary, money was no object as an expression of her love for Jesus. For Judas, money was precisely the object he hoped to gain in exchange for Jesus.
- For Mary, material things were a means (an instrument, a tool) to be used on behalf of Jesus, her goal. For Judas, Jesus was a means to be used on behalf of material things, his goal.
- Judas saw Jesus as someone in exchange for whom he could get money. Jesus saw Mary as someone in exchange for whom he would give his life.
- Judas filled the room with the stench of betrayal. Mary filled it with the sweet-smelling aroma of adoration and affection.
- Mary spilled a costly perfume for Jesus. Jesus spilled his priceless blood for her.

We need to ask ourselves a question: “Is there a lid on the perfume of our passion? Or are we willing, like Mary, to break the bottle of our pride, of our very lives, and pour out our love and adoration and praise?” Most of us have been accused, often falsely, of any number of things. But rarely, and sadly, have I met someone who is consistently charged with being an extravagant lover of Jesus. I'm grieved by this, but no one has ever accused me, at least to my face, of “wasting” my time and money and energy on Jesus.

The objection is quick in coming: “But if I do, what will others think? What will they say?” When we give ourselves wholly to Jesus people will always misunderstand. Spiritual extravagance almost always leads to criticism. Even your friends will misjudge you and your family will take offense. Worst of all, churchgoers may ask you to leave! We expect the world to mock us. The values of our society are so warped that we should never be surprised by its disdain. But all too often even Christians and church leaders will deem as wasteful and excessive our worship of Jesus.

Let’s not forget that those who took issue with Mary included Peter and John and Matthew and Andrew and James, among others. I suspect that even Simon and Lazarus had their doubts about what she did. People who “like” Jesus and “respect” him, who even sing songs about him, will often be the first to scold you for the uninhibited and extravagant display of your deep delight in the friend of sinners.

For many in the church, anything above and beyond the minimum is too much. To exceed the traditional, to cross the boundaries of what they deem socially appropriate and proper, will be deemed as waste. Jesus calls it beautiful.

True love never calculates. Genuine worship is never measured. Authentic affection never asks, “How little can I give and still meet the accepted standards of decency?” True, heartfelt adoration never asks, “What is the minimum I can get by with and not be thought of by others as holding back?” The heart of true worship is unfamiliar with the word “enough” and utterly oblivious to what is deemed fitting by others. The disciples, and especially Judas, thought Mary had gone way overboard and had wasted this precious perfume. “Mary, be reasonable,” they said to themselves. “Where is your sense of proportion?”

I’m convinced that if Mary felt anything at this moment it was that she had given too little. Perhaps she felt tempted to apologize for the perfume, not because it was so expensive but because it was so cheap when compared with the infinite value of the one whom she anointed. Imagine a conversation that could easily have passed between Mary and Peter:

P: “300 denarii! Mary, are you sure you want to do this? I mean, really!”

M: “Oh my, Peter. You’re right. I can’t believe I was so stupid and calloused and unthinking. What’s the matter with me? I hope you and the others will find the grace to forgive me.”

P: “That’s O.K., Mary. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Surely you haven’t forgotten how many times I messed up in the last three years. If I only had a denarius for every time I stuck my foot in my mouth!”

M: “Thanks, Peter.”

P: “Think nothing of it! We all make mistakes. Remember, it’s all part of growing up spiritually. Maturity only comes with time. Every once in a while we all miscalculate and tend to go overboard.”

M: “*Overboard?* What do you mean?”

P: “What do you mean ‘what do I mean’? I mean overboard. After all, 300 denarii is a staggering sum of money.”

M: “*Staggering?* You mean pathetic and paltry, don’t you?”

P: “No, Mary. I mean staggering, as in way, way, way too much.”

M: “Peter, I don’t know how to say this without offending you, but we’re on different planets! Yes, I’m embarrassed by what I did, but not because 300 denarii is so much but because it’s such a small

sum of money in comparison with the incomparable worth of Jesus.”

Had the hymn been written by then, Mary would surely have sung:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all!”

Christians have often been accused of lacking common sense, and rightly so. But there is at least one occasion when so-called “common sense” is “nonsense”, and that is when the Christian expresses her love for Jesus. There is a vast difference between the economics of common sense and the economics of love, and each has its place. Common sense follows the dictates of wisdom. Love is energized by the passions of the heart.

I can hear the protests of those whose common sense told them that Mary had violated what was proper and prudent: “She’s out of control! She has no sense of proportion. She’s so undignified! Mary, what’s the matter with you. We have a reputation to uphold. An image to protect. A position to maintain.” Such is their judgment because all they see is Mary. All they see is the wasted perfume. All they see is disorder. *All Mary sees is Jesus.*

What do you see when you worship? Other worshippers? Words projected on a screen? A worship leader? A hymn book? An orchestra or guitar player or drummer? You watch, as you wonder how much longer can this possibly last? As long as you remain a spectator of people rather than a participant, extravagant worship will never make sense. Common sense will always prevail over passion. It will always strike you as such a waste: of time, of energy, of your reputation. Those who found fault with Mary stood aloof to watch rather than to worship and thus mistook her beautiful act of adoration for waste. Mary didn’t stand aloof but drew near. All she saw was Jesus. And what she did felt so inadequate, so paltry, so minimal.

Even after getting a proper grip on what Mary had done, misunderstanding persists. You can hear it in the typical response: “Wow, Mary sacrificed a lot to worship Jesus.” No! Think carefully about this:

Mary saw Jesus as one whose beauty and worth were so infinitely more satisfying than all rival pleasures that nothing she gave up to gain him felt like a sacrifice.

A sacrifice is some price we pay, some hardship we endure to gain something else. For example, I may sacrifice the joy of ice cream for the benefit of losing weight. Or I may give up or sacrifice \$9 to see a good movie. I hope the weight loss and the movie make worthwhile the sacrifice I made to get them. My point is that in every sacrifice there is a sense of loss, of something paid or forfeited or given up.

But not with Mary! What she gained in knowing and enjoying and loving Jesus transformed into a great joy what might otherwise be thought of as a painful sacrifice. She *gladly* endured the rebuke of the disciples. She *joyfully* humbled herself in public. She *happily* gave away a year’s wage. Why? Because in doing so she gained God!

Once you see Jesus as Mary saw him, you will never ask: “How much money will it cost me?”

Once you have tasted the sweetness of the savior, as Mary did, you will never ask: “What will people think?”

Once you have experienced and known and enjoyed Jesus, as Mary did, you will never ask: “Will I die as a martyr? Will I lose the respect of others? What physical comforts will I forfeit?”

Do you long to love him like Mary did? Is it your desire to experience Jesus the way she did and to know him and enjoy him to such a degree that, like her, you’re ruined for anything else? Then do two things: (1) Search

your soul and ransack your life for anything, no matter how small or seemingly trivial it may be, that hinders whole-souled, single-minded, all-consuming devotion to Jesus. Hobbies? Activities? TV? Internet? Facebook? Money? The fear of what others might think? And deal radically and ruthlessly with it! (2) Commit yourself to seek him: in Scripture, in prayer, in meditation, in worship, in service to others, in community . . .