

**Mark:
How Do I Tell Jesus I Love Him?**

Mark 14:1-11

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Please be seated. Now, *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds*, that's about as perfect a hymn, I think, as has ever been written; and I have made it known in the past, I think, that I want it sung at my funeral. So if I expire before the end of the service, you can just sing that sixth verse! It's long, long been a favorite of mine since I first heard John Newton's great, great hymn.

Now I sort of feel sorry for that little boy that was taken out. I have very bad memories of my own children having been taken out of church...

Turn with me now to Mark, chapter 14. For some of you who have followed the plot through Mark, we have been going through Mark's Gospel of late at the prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings, but now we are returning to Sunday evenings, and if you haven't been able to join us on Wednesday evenings, we've moved on.

And now we come to chapter 14, and it really is a turning point in the narrative of Mark's Gospel. We're introduced here tonight to a wonderful story of a woman who breaks an alabaster jar and pours some ointment on Jesus' head. It's a story, I think, that is also repeated in the Gospel of Matthew, and I believe, as we shall see in a minute, also repeated in the Gospel of John.

But it is not, I think, to be confused with a similar story that we have in the Gospel of Luke in chapter seven. It's the woman who was a sinner; she also anoints the head of Jesus with some ointment, but also anoints His feet and wipes His feet with her hair. And because of that similar story and because John–Mark doesn't identify who the woman is, but John identifies—but if the two stories are the same, namely this one and John's story, is the same, it is Mary and Martha and Lazarus. It is that family, and this is Mary who is doing this. Tradition and most movies about the life of Jesus have identified Mary of Bethany as being an adulteress, as being a sinful woman because of that association with the story of Luke 7, and I really do think that that is incorrect. It would be very, very difficult—in fact, I think it would be impossible to maintain the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture and make those two stories be the same story.

Well, having said all of that, let's turn now to Mark 14, and before we read the passage together, let's come before God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You again for the provision of the Scriptures. We heard earlier in the prayer how You gave the Scriptures to us as a gift, given by inspiration by the out-breathing of Your holy mouth, and we pray now, Lord, that You would write it upon our hearts. We want to fall in love with Your word all over again. Help us now not to be distracted by other things and other concerns that may be on our hearts and minds just now. And we pray that we might be wholly devoted to that which is before us. Bless us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is God's holy and inerrant word:

Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth, and kill Him; for they were saying, 'Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people.'

And while He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you do not always have Me; she has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests, in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time.

Amen. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now I wonder if you have ever gone on an international trip, and you've gone through an airport and gone to the duty-free. You've got a few hours to spare, and you go to that duty-free store and you sample all of the perfumes. They're there, all the latest ones, and you sample all these very expensive perfumes. (I'm speaking of the ladies, now, you understand! Well, maybe you men, too....) Well, this is a story about expensive...not exactly perfume...it wasn't for that particular purpose, but it was a beautiful aroma that filled the room.

Mark tells us the story, and he tells it in a very particular way. He tells it sandwiching a story about Judas. As you see, in the opening two verses we're introduced to a plot of the scribes and of the chief priests, how they might capture and kill the Lord Jesus. And you'll see at the end of the story in verses 10 and 11 there's a return to that story, and now we're introduced to how it is in fact that the chief priests and the scribes will accomplish that: namely, through the instrumentality of Judas. And that's the outer shell of the story — this dark and sinister and somber theme.

But inside there's an absolute contrast. It's a total contrast. It's a beautiful way to tell a story, because it's a story that contrasts love and betrayal. It's a story that contrasts darkness and light, because in the inside it's the filling of the sandwich, if you like. We're given this beautiful glimpse of a woman who gives the very best thing that she has to Jesus because she loves Him. She is absolutely devoted to Him, and the contrast between the darkness on the outside and the light and love on the inside could not be greater. It's a little bit how *Lord of the Rings* begins. You know that beautiful opening story in Hobbiton and everything is wonderful and idyllic and pastoral; and then, all of a sudden it turns sinister because evil is brewing in the land. And evil is brewing in Jerusalem and is coming to its climax - now.

Now what Mark says is this is in Bethany, and Bethany is a couple of miles or so outside of Jerusalem. It is the home of Simon the leper. He doesn't tell us who the woman actually is. Now if the story here is the same one as the one in John 12 (and most commentators of an evangelical and reformed persuasion believe that it is), then the Bethany is of course where Mary and Martha and Lazarus—Lazarus, who has just recently been raised from the dead—this is a home in Bethany that Jesus would have frequented often. It's not that home that He's at now: He's at the home of Simon the leper.

Now, there is a tradition — there's absolutely no proof of it, but there is a tradition that Simon the leper is in fact the father of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. I inform you of that; I don't know anything of it myself. It helps to make some connections, I suppose. But it's not in Mary and Martha and Lazarus' home, it's in the home of Simon the leper.

Simon the leper is inviting these people—the disciples, Jesus, the woman, and, if the story with John is the same, Martha and Lazarus are there. He must be Simon the *former* leper, because lepers of course were cut off from all social contact with anyone. And possibly what has happened is either that this is in celebration of the raising of Lazarus or, more likely now, in celebration of the healing of Simon the leper. Maybe in the healing miracles that Jesus has performed, and other Gospels and the rate at which Jesus had performed some healing miracles around about this time in the last weeks of His earthly life, Simon the leper may well have been one of these healed.

There are possibly twenty people in this home: the twelve disciples, Jesus, Simon the leper, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, perhaps some members of Simon the leper's other immediate family. Remember in an earlier story in Luke, Martha had sniped at her sister Mary because she had been doing all of the cooking and Mary had been sitting at Jesus' feet. That's an earlier story. And perhaps Mary had been thinking about what she would do in this story from that moment onwards — perhaps saying to herself 'How can I demonstrate to Jesus that I truly love Him, and truly understand what it is that He's come to do for me?' Three things I want us to see:

I. We have in the first place a beautiful thing...a beautiful thing.

In verse 6, the latter half of verse 6, she has done...and the newer translations render it *a beautiful thing*...the New American Standard renders that *a good deed*...she has done a beautiful thing, a good thing.

She had taken a jar of very expensive perfume, of pure nard. Nard is an oil, an extract from the root of a plant grown in the East, probably in India. It was very expensive. Mark tells us it was worth around 300 denarii. A denarii was the amount you would earn for one day's wages, so it's almost a year's wages. Work it out — what is the average year's salary? Perhaps twenty, twenty-five, thirty thousand dollars, or so? It's an enormous amount of money, and it is Judas in the other stories that actually calculates for us the value of that which had been poured on Jesus' head and had seen it as a total waste. Judas, who, we already have begun to understand, because the Gospel writers don't keep it till the end, had already been pilfering from the bag held in common for Jesus and the disciples.

This jar of perfume was perhaps handed down from one generation to another. Perhaps she had inherited it from someone else. It was often used in the process of embalming a body in the case of a burial. It was a family heirloom. It would also serve as a sort of security, a sort of financial security. If Mary found herself...if the family found themselves in a tight corner there was always this that they could sell and get themselves out of trouble.

She takes the most valuable thing that she has and she gives it to Jesus. This is how she explains to Jesus what she thinks of Him. She's filled with gratitude. She wants Jesus to have it all. It's a spontaneous—well, perhaps not—perhaps a premeditated gesture of devotion and love and sacrifice, anointing Him so that she might demonstrate to Him what she feels.

Calvin says she was guided by the breath of the Spirit that in sure confidence she should do this in duty to Christ. I really do think that she probably premeditated this. She took the jar with her that night to the home of Simon the leper. She meant to do it. She didn't say 'Now, if you give this amount, I'll match

it.' I'm not saying that such an approach is wrong, but it is not how she approached it. This was something between her and her Savior. She wanted to do it not that others might see it, not that she might be praised for doing it; she didn't do it to impress: she did it because she loved Him. And Jesus said it's a beautiful thing. It's a beautiful thing. She didn't look for the approval of the disciples either before or afterwards. It's a beautiful thing.

I wonder if you can gaze into the heart of this woman and see in her the motivation that drove her to give the best thing that she had to her Lord and to her Savior and to her King — a beautiful thing.

II. In the second place, a wasteful thing.

Yes, a wasteful thing, because that's what some of them said. That's what Judas said, especially. The ointment, they said, could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor (verse 5) and they rebuked her harshly. Now, the Greek is of the flaring of nostrils, the kind of gesture a horse might do.

Jesus says something unexpected and extraordinary by any estimation: "The poor," He says, "you always have with you. You can help them any time you want. But you don't always have Me." There's something arrogant about that, isn't there, on the surface? If you or I were to say that, if you or I were to infer...if a homeless person comes up to you and you were to say something like that — you know, the poor are always here...you can give to the poor anytime, but you can't always give to me, because I'm not going to be here forever — what would you think of somebody like that? There's something terribly arrogant about it on one level. You'd say about such a person 'He's either crazy or he's bad.'

I've just come back from South Africa, and as you drive out of the airport in Johannesburg or in Cape Town, you see the shanty towns. Hundreds of thousands of some of the poorest people in the world living on top of each other in a massive sea of humanity, in homes made out of cardboard and bits of wood and corrugated iron, with no water and no electricity, no amenities of any kind. And you could find the same in Calcutta or Rio, or Mexico City, and dozens of other places in the world. And people give their lives to help such people...*Doctors Without Borders*... some of our own mission work involved in helping the poorest people in the world....And Jesus is setting Himself above all of that. There are many millions in the world tonight who are struggling for food, for a loaf of bread, to get enough to buy sufficient food for one day. There are millions of people in the world just like that dying of AIDS and other diseases, and Jesus is saying 'Look, you always have these people, but you will not always have Me.'

Here He is in the home of Simon the leper. He's eating...I don't know what they're eating...roast lamb? It's not quite Passover yet, so maybe they weren't having

roast lamb that night. But it's good food! It's a celebration! If it's the healing of Simon the leper, if it was the coming to life of Lazarus, there's a party—there's a candlelight supper! The best food! They're in a warm, comfortable home, and Jesus is reclining with the disciples, and this is what He says: "The poor you always have with you, but you don't always have Me." He sets Himself above the needs of humanity. He puts Himself in a different category.

Now I put it to you again: He's either crazy or bad, or else He's the Lord...or else, He really is the Son of God incarnate. And this woman has said to herself 'I want to do something. I want to do something for my Savior before it's too late. I want to demonstrate to Him how much I love Him.'

You know, perhaps in a more rational moment Jesus might have said to her, if she'd have come to Him and said 'Jesus, this is what I want to do for You'...you know, perhaps Jesus would have said to her 'You know, that's wonderful, that's a beautiful thing; but why don't you sell it and give it to the poor instead?' You know, in a more rational moment maybe He would have said something like that. But that's not what she did. It was a gesture of her love and her devotion to Jesus Christ, and He took it. He did not chastise her. He did not enter into the rebuke of the disciples.

You know, that's a challenge, isn't it, when you think about it? If you'd been there watching her pour \$25-\$30,000 worth on His head, and — be honest! — you're tempted to say 'That's a waste! That's a little extravagant! Twenty-five dollars, thirty dollars, hundred dollars maybe, but \$25,000? That's a waste!'

It's a test, my friends. Isn't it a test? Is this just an ordinary man here? Is this just a noble prophet here? Or is this in fact the Lord incarnate? Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Prophet, our Priest, our King?

Do you see what this story is saying? That there's something utterly unique about Jesus. He accepts the worship of others. He accepts; He expects it. And that's what it's all about. That's what the Gospel of Mark has all been about, that He is the Son of God. And it's not a wasteful thing: it's a beautiful thing. It was a beautiful thing.

I wonder can you enter into that tonight, because I want to put it to you, it's a test. Because if you can't enter into that, if you're tempted to say 'But it's still a waste,' you haven't seen Him for who He actually is: the Creator, the Lord of glory, incarnate in human flesh.

III. A prophetic thing.

But there's a third thing I want us to see: Not only a beautiful thing and a wasteful thing, but a prophetic thing. In a sense, do you see, she had given to the poor.

She had given to Him who became poor for our sakes that we might become rich in Him. In that sense, as He says in verse 8, she did what she could. She did what she could. And Jesus says something that puts it all in perspective: “She anointed My body beforehand for burial.” She anointed My body beforehand for burial. Jesus understood what she was doing, but more importantly, she understood what she was doing.

Do you remember—well, maybe you don't now—so turn back with me to chapter 8 and verse 31. (It's all the 31's coming up) — 8:31 —

“He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, *and be killed...*”

9:31 — Again:

“He was teaching His disciples saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He is killed, after three days He will rise.’”

And 10:31...actually, 32, now...

“And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again He began to tell them what was to happen, saying, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem...’”

[and again it's about His betrayal and death, and He's going to be delivered over to the Gentiles and mocked, and they will spit on Him and flog Him, and kill Him.]

And you know, Mark is saying the disciples still didn't get it. They still didn't get it, but this woman got it. She understood that He was going to die, and she understood that He was going to die in the place of sinners like her. And I think that what this woman is doing is anointing the body of Jesus because she might not be able to do it when the time comes. She probably would have absolutely no access to the body of Jesus when the time comes, so she's doing it now. She would give Him a royal burial.

You know, she was familiar with that passage in Isaiah 53:9 — “He will make His grave with the rich.” This Man who became poor for our sakes, He will make His grave with the rich, and she anoints His body.

Think about it. They're having a party. They're having a candlelight supper in Northeast Jackson, and what's the conversation all about around supper? And here's this woman...and Jesus says ‘Do you know what this woman has just done? She has prepared Me for My burial.’ Now that's a conversation stopper!

She understood. She understood why Jesus had come. She had got, I think, into the very heart of the gospel; that she understood that Jesus was dying for her — for her sins, for her guilt, for her redemption. He was paying the ransom price to set her free. He was meeting the just anger and wrath of God in her place, in her room, in her stead.

You see, there's a struggle taking place. In this very party, in this very candlelight supper, there's a struggle taking place, not just between the disciples and this woman, not just between Judas and this woman, not just between the Sanhedrin and this woman, but it's between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. It's that ancient struggle, it's that struggle that we see right back in Genesis 3 and it's emerging again here: the dragon is here; Satan is entering into the heart of Judas.

That's what Mark is encapsulating — this beautiful story with the trouble that's brewing all around, because it's not only this woman who gets it, Satan gets it, too. He understands what's happening, too, and he is trying his utmost to prevent it. She is singing

“Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all.”

That's what she's singing, and Satan is singing another song. It's a song of betrayal; it's a song of the most dastardly betrayal imaginable. And do you know what has sparked it off? Do you know what the final straw was for Judas, I think? It was the sight of \$30,000 worth being poured on Jesus' head! ‘Imagine,’ he's probably saying to himself, ‘imagine what I could have done with some of that!’

I think for weeks and probably months Judas has been allowing secret sin to eat away at him like a cancer; and you know, months before, I doubt that Judas would have ever believed that he could do what he's doing now. And he goes to the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin who are plotting to arrest Jesus but they don't know how to do it because they daren't arrest Him in daylight because there might be a riot, and Judas gives them the opportunity. In the darkness, in Gethsemane, he'll point Him out to them; in the darkness, where there are no people around and no possibility of a riot, and they will take Him and arrest Him. And they will give him some money. And the secret sin in Judas' life is about to take him away. The vicious, vicious spiral of secret unrepented sins... the secret sin had driven him to think the unimaginable: not just to walk away from Jesus, but to betray Him.

Do you know the last word in verse 11? “And he sought an opportunity to betray Him...” To *hand Him over* is the word. It's a very important word in the New Testament. Paul picks it up in Romans 8: “He that spared not His own Son, but

handed Him over [delivered Him over] for us all....”

You see, it's not just Judas that is at work here. In the mystery of divine providence, God is bringing His purpose of redemption to fullness and to the climax. He is handing over His own beloved Son for the likes of this woman, and for the likes of you and me. And this woman sees it. She grasps the gospel, and she pours out her love and her affection. And I wonder tonight from the depths of our hearts and souls what measure of affection do we pour upon Jesus' head as we view what He has done for us?

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, again we thank You for Your word, and we thank You for this beautiful story. We pray that the example of this woman might drive and motivate us, too, to acts of love and devotion.

We thank You for the gospel. We thank You for the handing over of Your dear Son, that You so loved the world that You gave Your only Son for our redemption. Now bless us, we pray, at the close of this Sabbath Day, and grant that as we close it out we might have thoughts of You that would well up within our hearts in praise and love and adoration, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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