

WHY DO YOU BOTHER HER?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

by Steve Zeisler

The account we will examine in this message begins with chief priests and teachers of the law pursuing their own dark purposes. The passage ends with a disciple betraying the Lord. In the middle is the remarkable account of a woman interrupting a dinner party. Mark 14:1-11:

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as 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.

Some of those present 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.

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

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.

Let's begin with some cultural observations. Verse one says that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away. Both of these festivals had their origins in the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread was reminiscent of God's instruction to the Jews leaving Egypt that they were to clean out their houses and remove all traces of leaven (yeast) in preparation for the extraordinary things God was about to do. In the Bible, leaven is symbolic of sin. Just as a tiny amount of leaven can spread throughout an entire batch of dough, making the bread rise, so does sin work its way silently and subtly through our lives. It permeates and increases its influence. The yearly festival called for a ruthless cleansing of life and home, looking for any possible evidence of compromise with sin, and taking action against it.

The Passover feast told the story of God's mercy. On their last night in captivity the Israelites in Egypt were spared the death of their first born because God was gracious. A lamb died, its blood was sprinkled on their homes, and this mark caused God's judgment to "passover" them when it fell on Egypt. The purpose of the Passover feast was to reinforce gratitude, humility before God, and thankfulness for his mercy.

In Jesus' day, religious leaders were uninterested in the purpose behind the festivals. Instead of scouring their lives for evidence of sin or humbly thanking the God who spared them when they didn't deserve it, they were plotting to kill an innocent man. Verse 2 tells us that the choice to wait until after the feast to kill him was not out of respect for the holiness of the day; it was a purely strategic decision intended to avoid upsetting the people and causing a

riot.

In verse 3, we read that Jesus was reclining at a table. The setting was a large dinner party held in the home of Simon the Leper, in Bethany. At such an occasion people did not eat at a table with chairs; instead, they reclined on cushions, their feet pointing away from the table. Jesus was reclining in this manner when a woman entered the room and poured perfume on his head.

John 12:3 tells us that the woman was Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. The sealed alabaster container of perfume was very costly, worth a year's wages for a working person. It was probably part of her dowry, given to make her a more desirable marriage partner. By choosing to offer such an expensive act of devotion, Mary very likely diminished her future prospects for marriage.

A similar incident is recorded in Luke 7:36-50. In the home of another man named Simon, another woman poured perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. However, the details show that this is a different event. The event recorded by Mark took place in Bethany at the home of Simon the Leper. The event recorded by Luke took place in Galilee at the home of Simon the Pharisee. The woman in Luke's account was probably a prostitute-the text says she "had lived a sinful life"-and the Pharisees couldn't understand why Jesus would let an unclean woman touch him. The focus in Luke's account is Jesus' refusal to reject a sinful woman, but in Mark's account, the focus is Mary's righteousness.

Verses 4 and 5 say that the disciples were indignant and rebuked Mary harshly. Her actions were certainly an assault on propriety. Interrupting a formal dinner party to pour oil on the guest of honor would have been a gross violation of protocol. However, their indignation was less about Mary's impropriety than it was about money. They criticized Mary's extravagance, saying that the money should have been given to the poor instead. However, they were not genuinely passionate for the poor. Rather, they wanted Jesus to lead a messianic revolt that would use concern for the poor as a strategy for gaining the support of the masses.

The disciples were just like other first century Jewish patriots who loved God, loved their nation, and had certain expectations of the promised Messiah. When they chose to follow Jesus, they fitted him with the garment of Messianic expectations. They had not yet understood the spiritual revolution at the heart of his message. They expected him to accomplish what they had already assumed to be God's plan.

Mary was different. She was so altered by Jesus' love that she saw him more clearly than anyone else did. Her beloved brother, Lazarus, had been dead but was now alive. Her Lord had spoken of his own imminent death, and she took him seriously. She was filled with gratitude and love as she entered the room and poured perfume on Jesus' head. She was unaware of the expense or the observers because the Lord filled her vision.

Mary worshipped Christ, and that is why Jesus' words are so pertinent: "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." People like Mary make us see beneath the surface of our actions. They highlight our concern about appearances, and they challenge our assumptions about what matters to God. They clarify our vision of Christ.

Charles Thomas (C.T.) Studd had a clear vision of Christ. Born in 1860 to a wealthy family, he was a Cambridge scholar and a world-renown cricket player. As a young man, he gave away his inheritance and left his life of privilege to serve the Lord in evangelistic ministry, first in China, then in India and Africa. His family and friends thought him peculiar and couldn't understand why he would throw everything away, assuming he could do more for God by capitalizing on his fame and fortune. Studd's response was, "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell." C.T. Studd heard a different call, and the witness of his peculiarity said more than trading on his fame could have ever said.

We can make a couple of additional observations about the text. As Jesus approached the end of his earthly life, women were the most sensitive, helpful, and honorable of his servants. Mary believed Jesus when he said he was going to die. The disciples refused, as long as they possibly could, to believe what he said, but Mary loved him for who he was and gave to him what would be a beautiful and memorable gift. The women took his body and buried

going to die. The disciples refused, as long as they possibly could, to believe what he said, but Mary loved him for who he was and gave to him what would be a beautiful and memorable gift. The women took his body and buried it, and they loved him in his death and burial for who he was and what he had done for them. Their hearts were filled with gratitude. It was enough for them that Jesus loved them, healed them, changed them, prayed for them, and displayed the heart of God to them.

The other disciples loved Jesus too, but they expected something from him. They anticipated the building of empires and tearing down of strongholds that they expected from Messiah. They loved the Lord and the things they anticipated he would bring about, but Mary just loved him for who he was. Simple gratitude without lofty expectation is what stands out in this story. It is a lesson in adoration and worship of Jesus Christ for who he is out of gratitude for what is already true without attaching expectations to what may follow.

Another observation concerns giving to the poor. Despite their mixed motives, wasn't it reasonable for the disciples to argue that the perfume should have been sold to help the poor? We can look to the example of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-8) for the answer. The Lord reached out to Zacchaeus, whose gratitude in turn resulted in extraordinary generosity.

Generosity that intends to accomplish a goal (gaining the approval of observers or dealing a death-blow to poverty) will always end in disappointment. The poor will always be with us and the applause of onlookers will fade.

People like Mary, who live out of gratitude, who see Christ for who he is, who receive love from him and love him back, will be foolishly generous forever. The most generous people are those who are not playing to the crowd or trying to change the world. The poor are actually better off when people like Mary love Christ and ignore "the bottom line" in their devotion to him.

Jesus said that Mary would be forever remembered for what she had done. "Wherever the gospel is preached, what she has done will also be told." You cannot preach the gospel without striking this theme. The gospel is about revolution. It is about becoming peculiar. The gospel is about convention breaking, cross bearing; changes that make us misunderstood. The only way to preach the gospel is to urge people to be peculiar enough to be misunderstood for Christ's sake. May it be so with us.

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