



DYING DEVOTION

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 Mark 14:1-11
 38th Message
 Brian Morgan
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This morning and over the next few Sundays we will examine the climax of the greatest story ever told, the passion of our Lord Jesus from the gospel of Mark. On Easter week, pilgrims from all over the world visit Israel in an effort to experience the drama of that event by retracing Jesus' steps on the Via Dolorosa (Way of Sorrows), which winds its way from Pilate's Court to Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified.

Rummaging through some old color slides recently of my first trip to Israel, I found a photograph of one of our more enthusiastic elders, caught in a full sprint on the Via Dolorosa. I titled it, "Here's John running where Jesus walked!" That snapshot is typical of our age. We are so eager to experience everything in so brief a span that our rapid pace results in our truly experiencing very little. Our new technologies are designed to help connect us with everyone but they actually render it even more difficult to really make contact with anyone, free from outside distraction.

But the need for connection has never been more vital. Mark can greatly assist us at this critical hour. When we come to the holiest ground in his gospel, instead of speeding up the pace he slows it down to a virtual standstill.¹ And instead of forcing us to connect with scores of individuals he invites us to connect with but a few, and even some of those are anonymous. Ultimately, as time seems to stand still we will be left with just one person, the Lord Jesus. When that time comes, we will learn what it means to worship the one who gave his life for us.

Our story begins on the Wednesday of Passion Week. Earlier, on Sunday, Jesus had made his triumphal entry into the city. On Monday, he cursed the fig tree and cleansed the temple. On Tuesday, he delivered the Olivet Discourse, in which he outlined the complete destruction of the temple and the city. One could hardly think of actions or words more confrontational.² Thus it is hardly surprising that his actions provoked the anger of Israel's leaders, leading to his eventual death.

I. Deceptive Plotting (14:1-2)

Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread was two days off; 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, lest there be a riot of the people." (NASB)

It is just two days prior to Passover, and all Israel is gathered to commemorate the Exodus. Jerusalem is bustling with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. At this

most holy time, as the nation is celebrating their miraculous deliverance from slavery, her religious leaders are plotting deception and death. They want use the feast as a cover to kill Jesus. But Jesus' popularity and the presence of such huge crowds pose a threat to their timing. Fearing that a riot will break out if they take immediate action, they deliberate about waiting until after the festival, when everyone will have left for home. By the end of the scene, however, Judas' proposal alleviates all their concerns, and they throw caution to the winds.

While Israel's leaders are plotting Jesus' execution, he is in the midst of an intimate fellowship meal at a home in Bethany.

II. Fragrant Devotion (14:3-9)

A. What a Waste!

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; 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 given to the poor." And they were scolding her. (14:3-5)

Jesus seeks lodging out of sight of Jerusalem proper, in Bethany, a village just over the hill from the city. There he finds refuge in the home of "Simon the leper." Jesus had probably cured the man; if not, all present were violating the Mosaic Law. Just as they begin to recline at a fellowship meal, perhaps given in appreciation to Jesus to celebrate his healing of the leper, an unnamed woman enters the home, carrying an alabaster vial of costly perfume. John identifies the woman as Mary (John 12:3), the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

For his own purposes, Mark keeps the woman's identity anonymous. This has the effect of making her actions an icon of devotion. The perfume, perhaps derived from the nard plant that is native to India, was very expensive. R. T. France suggests, "The single flask of ointment that could have been sold for nearly a year's wages must surely have been a family heirloom."³ The woman walks right up behind Jesus, breaks the neck of the flask, and pours out the entire contents on his head. What an extravagant act of devotion! No king in Israel had been anointed like this since the days of Jehu (2 Kgs 9:6).

Gundry suggests that she did not need to break the flask: “she needed only to remove the stopper or untie the piece of cloth that covered the mouth of the flask. Breaking the flask dramatized the outpouring of all the contents by making the flask henceforth unusable.”⁴ As the contents of the broken flask spill out over the head of Jesus, the fragrance fills the house. Thus, into that festive atmosphere floats the fragrance of costly, whole-hearted devotion.

The woman’s actions leave some of Simon’s dinner guests aghast, however. Mark doesn’t say who they were, but Matthew identifies them as the disciples (26:8), while John further specifies that it was Judas Iscariot (12:4-5). As the treasurer of the group, he probably protested the loudest. “What a waste!” they exclaim. During festival time there were probably thousands of poor within just a few miles of Jerusalem. It was customary for the Jews to give gifts to them on the evening of the Passover. Thousands could probably have been fed for some time with the proceeds from what had just been “wasted” on Jesus. So overcome are some of the disciples with the irresponsibility of the woman’s action, their indignation (the verb means, “to express violent displeasure”) gives way to open rebuke, and the unnamed woman is subjected to a lengthy tirade of humiliation and censor.

Here we come to the turning point of the scene as Jesus enters into the fray. He forcefully defends Mary’s actions, rebuking those who are censoring her.

B. What Value and Eternal Significance!

But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For the poor you always have with you, and whenever you wish, you can do them good; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, that also which this woman has done shall be spoken of in memory of her.” (14:6-9)

Jesus rebukes her critics, on two counts. First, they had no sense of divine priorities. The issue was not a question of neglecting service to the poor, for Jesus often spoke of caring for the poor, and earlier had asked the rich young ruler to give up all that he owned to give to the poor (France). So why does he not join in and condemn the unnamed woman’s actions? His answer suggests that is always appropriate to give to the poor, for their cause is enduring, but this was a once in a lifetime moment of devotion, when spontaneous extravagance was more than appropriate, much as a groom’s one-time investment when he purchases a wedding ring for his bride. R.T. France suggests, “There is room in the kingdom of God both for the careful stewardship of resources for the sake of those in need, and on occasion, for spontaneous and uncalculating devotion. True discipleship embraces not only scrupulous accountancy but also reckless exuberance. There is a time to gath-

er...and a time to throw away” (Eccl 3:5-6).⁵

Flo Yoshida was our Scripture reader this morning. I had the privilege of ministering at her 96 year-old father’s funeral last week. James Imahara was a diminutive man, but he lived a very full life. Because he was of Japanese descent he was placed in an internment camp during World War II. He lost most of his possessions, yet he still able care for all of his ten children, his grandchildren and sixteen great grandchildren. At his passing, fifty of the Imahara clan traveled from nine states to attend his funeral. Someone might ask, why not take all of the money expended to bring this family together for a funeral and give it to the poor? But this was a once in a lifetime event. The family listened as his grandchildren sang “The Old Rugged Cross.” They saw their grandfather on videotape, at 96, singing “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,” in Japanese. They heard a daughter tell her parents how much she loved them, because they had spent the last ten years of their life caring for her grandfather. They heard the passion of two sons who could hardly speak of their father so great was the emotion of the moment. They saw 96 roses on the open casket. Such an hour calls for extravagant worship. “There is a time to gather...and a time to throw away” (Eccl 3:5-6).

Jesus has more to say to the cost-conscious disciples. It was not just a question of proper priorities; they lacked spiritual sensitivity as to what was going on in this divine hour. The woman’s expression of devotion had deep symbolic value. Though not even she may have perceived the full significance of the hour, her actions had introduced a holy dimension, something that was larger than life, into this ordinary home. And she was able to do it within her means: “she has done what she could.” Israel’s long-awaited messianic king would soon to be delivered over to a hasty death. His body would not receive the normal care and proper treatment for burial. Behind the woman’s devotion Jesus saw the divine hand of love anointing him for his burial. As she allowed the impulses of her heart to have full expression, her devotion filled the room with a beautiful fragrance that symbolically anticipated the fragrance of Christ’s holy death, a death that would bring salvation to the whole world, a salvation greater than the Exodus: He would make the poor to be rich. Realizing that, the gift of pure nard worth a year’s wage paled by comparison. But, as Jesus said, “she has done what she could.”

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

...

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

In light of what was taking place in that home, the

woman's devotion was entirely appropriate. So appropriate was it to the divine moment, it not only anticipated the future, it would be eternally remembered. Jesus said that what she had done would be permanently recorded in sacred history for every generation, wherever the gospel is preached, as an icon of true worship. What Jesus said of her on that evening is being fulfilled in our hearing this day. Remembering her we are stirred by her devotion.

But lest we become too caught up in this holy moment, Mark thrusts us ahead into the horror of betrayal.

III. Betrayal for Money (14:10-11)

And Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests, in order to betray Him to them. And 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. (14:10-11)

In the first scene, Jesus spoke about the opportune time for devotion. Here, his enemies are seeking an opportunity for betrayal and death. The leader of the pack is the same one who earlier had rebuked Mary for "wasting" expensive perfume on Jesus. This one, an intimate disciple, will betray Jesus to the chief priests. The offer brings gladness to those in authority, and the deal is sealed with a handsome honorarium.

How horrifying, to see holy devotion bracketed by hate on the one hand and betrayal on the other! Money, devotion and opportunity link the three scenes. In one case, a year's wages is poured out over the head of Jesus in a supreme act of devotion, and Jesus applauds it as a once in a lifetime opportunity. In the second, those who are devoted to themselves will waste a holy life in order to get rich. In the first case, the act of devotion is objected to on behalf of the poor; in the second, the poor are not even mentioned.

The story leaves us with but one question, How do we worship? Three expressions are listed here: those of Jesus' enemies, his disciples, and the unnamed woman.

IV. How do we Worship?

A. Self Devotion

Sadly, Jesus' enemies miss everything that is true about worship. Blinded by the paranoia of losing control, they miss the holiness of Israel's memory in Passover and the yet greater Passover about to be enacted. They refuse to yield control to the new king, and yet they are surprisingly successful in their deceptive ploy. The irony is that at the very pinnacle of their freedom they will be mere pawns on the chessboard of the kingdom of God, unwilling instruments to a higher end, one of cosmic proportions, but they will never benefit from that which those ends will achieve.

Does this scenario describe your life? You may attend all the holy feasts, but you have never given over control of your life to Israel's king. You may be successful

in all your exploits, but in the end, you will be a pawn, never benefiting from what God overrules in your life. That kind of worship is given no word of correction, only stark silence. This is the silent consequence of being given over to what you've already predetermined in your heart. It even paves the way to make you successful in your deception and idolatry, so that when your demise comes, it will become a public testimony to all—a shattered icon of self-devotion, like Judas' thirty pieces of silver.

B. Devotion that is Cold and Calculated

The disciples, on the other hand, represent a kind of worship that appears responsible, but underneath is cold and calculating. Devoid of love and emotion, worship can be reduced to responsible duty. We may tithe, and care for the poor with a self-imposed rigor, but we are behaving like dish-rag accountants, lacking spiritual sensitivity. There is about as much devotion in that kind of act as there is in writing a monthly alimony check. That kind of cold worship is challenged and rebuked, just as Cain was rebuked by God for offering his Creator a calculated tip instead of the best of what he had, the first-fruits. Cain did not repent, and his decision led to an agonizing exile. Judas did not repent, and his led to a horrifying suicide.

C. Dying Devotion

In contrast to these two is the woman, Mary. The one who earlier had sat at the feet of Jesus and was rebuked by her sister Martha for her lack of service is now driven by spontaneous internal impulses to give the best gift that she had. Her devotion was extravagant, even extraordinary by human terms, but appropriate, perhaps even modest, in divine terms: "she has done what she could." By following the impulses of her enraptured heart she infused an ordinary home with an enduring holiness that was larger than life. Simon invited Jesus to a supper of appreciation. He had no idea that at this meal he would smell the fragrance that would bring salvation to the ends of the earth for all time.

Just once in your life, ask the Lord to allow this to happen to you. Be keenly aware when people are entering into the sufferings of Christ, and allow your heart to be drawn into devotion. Seize the opportunity. Perhaps you will give an offering whose scent will fill the house and you will turn a home into a temple of worship. You may be rebuked for irresponsibility but, on the other hand, it could be said of you, "you just did what you could."

Those are the three expressions of worship which Mark sets in stark contrast, one with another. Let us pray that we will be like the woman.

But there is one more thing we ought not neglect in this text. What was it that Jesus learned in this incident?

D. The View of Jesus

Jesus was the recipient of all three expressions of worship. Thus, we discover from his point of view that the holiest expressions of love are given birth in the womb of hate. The two go hand in hand. Love does not grow in a vacuum of niceties. And so it may be true for us that those whom we invest most in may bring us great sorrow, while the unexpected outsider may surprise us with consummate joy. And we, like Jesus, must anchor our hope in the absolute sovereignty of God, whose constant practice it is to work out his highest good in the midst of the most depraved evil. And that is a God who is worthy of our devotion. Amen.

1. Stephen Smith has an interesting discussion on this in his book: "Mark begins his narrative at breakneck speed, and ends it at a virtual standstill." *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 143.

2. "To evoke, even conditionally, the destruction of 'this temple' was to touch not just stone and gold and not only the general well-being but history and hope, national identity, self-understanding and pride." (Meyer) N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 425.

3. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Doubleday, 1998) 176.

4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 813

5. France, 176-177.

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