

THE GOSPEL IN AN ALABASTER JAR

Today we're going to have a look at an event that occurred just a few days before Jesus' final Passover.

Let's read the story, in Mark 14:1-9: ¹"Now the Passover and the Festival of 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. ²"But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot." ³While 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.⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? ⁵It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

⁶"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."



Why is this story so important that it will be told wherever the gospel message goes, in memory of this woman? Why is it so significant?

Admittedly the woman had done a very lovely favour for Jesus. It was appropriate for Him to thank her in a very nice way. But surely it wasn't that important that it had to be told wherever the gospel was preached?

Well, that is what has happened (it has been told wherever the gospel has been preached), because when the disciples were inspired to write the stories of what Jesus did, they included the story of what this woman did. It is included in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, as an essential part of the story of Jesus. To answer why it is so important, we need to consider the context, and we soon see that it is all about the death of Jesus.

V1: It happened just before Passover, when there was a conspiracy to kill Jesus.

V8: Jesus connected it with His burial.

V10: Immediately after this, Judas went away to betray Jesus. John's account shows Judas was particularly upset at this extravagant "waste" of money, and most likely this event was the "last straw" that caused Judas to give Jesus away. Events that occurred to Jesus have meaning and significance. E.g. the miracle of the feeding of 5,000 people helped illustrate that Jesus is the Bread of Life.

This event helped illustrate things about the sacrifice and death of Jesus, and the way we should respond to His sacrifice. In a way, this story is a microcosm of the gospel itself. That's why I've called the sermon "The Gospel in an Alabaster Jar:" And that's why the story is so important it has become part of the gospel itself.

Let's look at 3 ways in which this anointing resembles the sacrifice of Jesus Himself, and points to His death and what it means to us.

1. Firstly, it was done out of love.

Let's give this woman a name. The account in John tells us who she was.

John 12:1-3 ¹“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him. ³Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

Verses 1-2 It seems that this was a special dinner in Jesus' honour to thank Him for raising Lazarus. It was the only time in history that two men who would be raised from the dead ate at the same table! Lazarus had been raised, and Jesus would be raised. So it was a remarkable occasion. But this will become commonplace in the Kingdom of God – everyone will have been resurrected then, and we'll have fascinating things to talk about!

Verse 3 The woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She is mentioned only 3 times in the Gospels, and in each instance she is at the feet of Jesus.

- ◆ She sat at His feet and listened to the Word. (Luke 10:38-42)
- ◆ She fell at His feet in sorrow after the death of Lazarus. (John 11:28-32)
- ◆ She worshipped at His feet when she anointed Him with the perfume. (John 12:1ff)

She found at His feet her blessing, she brought to His feet her burdens, and she gave at His feet her best. So Mary was motivated to do this out of love. Nobody told her to do it. It certainly wasn't commanded. It was simply something she took upon herself to do because she loved Jesus. Perhaps she had some idea that Jesus was going to die. It may have just been women's intuition? Or the penny may have dropped with her? Jesus talked enough about His impending death, but most of them just didn't get it.

She was also full of love and gratitude to Jesus for resurrecting Lazarus her brother, and the way she sat and listened to Jesus shows her devotion and love of His way. Mary's love and devotion is also shown by the way she unashamedly wiped His feet with her hair. Why would she do that, except out of deep love?

It's interesting that we have the symbolism of footwashing here too. Footwashing is a proof of service that stems from love. Jesus also made His sacrifice out of love. He didn't have to do it if He didn't want to. He offered to, gladly, from the foundation of the world, because Jesus and the Father loved the world so much.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

2. The second way Mary's action was like the death of Jesus is that it was a sacrifice. It was a very costly offering.

Mark 14:3 “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.”

Alabaster is a beautiful semi-transparent gemstone. It was used to make containers which would hold only the most expensive and precious contents. When the contents were extremely precious, the makers would work the stone in such a way that the only way to empty it would be to break the container (at its long neck). The perfume was made from the oil of a herb plant called nard or spikenard, which at that time was only found in India.

Verses 4-5 ⁴ “Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.”

It was worth the amount of money a working person would earn in an entire year. Perhaps roughly \$20,000!

Mary’s love for Jesus was so great that she was willing to sacrifice herself for Jesus, she wasn’t worried about what it cost her. And of course it was the love of Jesus that caused Him to sacrifice His life for us.

We also should be willing to show our love for God by being a sacrifice.

Romans 12:1 “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.”

For sacrifice to be meaningful it needs to be voluntary, and it needs to cost something. As long as the perfume stayed in the alabaster jar it didn’t benefit anyone. When it was poured out, its fragrance filled the house. Each of us has been given spiritual gifts. If we keep them to ourselves they benefit no one. As we sacrifice ourselves in using our spiritual gifts, whether they be encouraging others, prayer, hospitality, serving, teaching, the sweet-smelling perfume of our offerings is spread abroad.

3. The third way Mary’s devotion was similar to Jesus’ crucifixion, is that it was extravagant.

It was far more than was necessary! It was outrageous!

Mark 14:4-5 ⁴ “Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.”

Several of the disciples complained about this. John’s account singles out Judas as the main critic, “not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief.”

Mark 14:6-7 ⁶ “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 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’ answer was that there would be plenty of opportunities to help the poor in the future, but this was the last opportunity to show worship to Jesus.

Jesus appreciated her attitude. This incident is similar to the one in which Martha did lots of serving while Mary sat and listened to Jesus.

The practical things are important, but there is a time when everything gives way to love and devotion, and it is important to put Jesus first – ahead of everything, even service. Jesus looks at the heart and He loved the heart, desire, commitment and love that Mary showed, the willingness to go over and above what is expected of us.

Mary wasn't thinking "What is the least I can do? What is my duty, and I'll only do that. How do other people show their respect for Jesus? I'll do the same as them." She didn't ask the disciples if it was okay. She didn't even ask Jesus. She just did what came from the overflowing depth of love in her heart.

There's a certain unselfconsciousness about love – who cares what other people think, I'll just do it. And she took the opportunity, immediately, and just did it. How often do we think "I'll do that, it would be really helpful," but we fail to do so and lose the opportunity! (Maybe because we're too shy or feel awkward about it.) But Mary's impulsive act of extravagant kindness really uplifted and moved Jesus, and He said she had done a "beautiful thing" and prepared Him for burial.

Mark 14:8 "She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial."

It was the custom to bathe and anoint the bodies of the dead. After the body had been anointed, the flask in which the perfume had been contained and the fragments were laid with the dead body in the tomb. (W. Barclay, "Mark")

Mary's extravagant offering pictured the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in a way that words couldn't. God gave us an extravagant gift in the person of Jesus Christ. It was an outrageous gift, worth far more than what we deserve.

Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Grace is extravagant. Jesus gave everything He had for us – when we rejected Him. He showed us total love, total commitment, total sacrifice.

The question is, how should we respond to that? What do we do about it? Isn't the answer that we should respond in the same way Mary did – with a love that doesn't ask how little we can do to get by, a love that doesn't worry about what other people think of us, a love that is willing to be extravagant, that counts everything loss for Jesus Christ.

When Mary poured perfume on Jesus she wasn't only picturing the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross; she also pictured the way we should respond to Jesus, the attitude of extravagant, sacrificial love we should have in our devotion to Him.

Jesus wanted Mary's example to be talked about wherever the gospel was preached, because it sums up the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ.

John 12:3 "Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Look one last time at her attitude of humility and extravagant, self-sacrificing love! The beautiful aroma filled the whole house. It pictures the extravagant, self-sacrificing love of Jesus, who offered Himself for our sins, and the sweet-smelling perfume of His grace fills the whole world.

God has been extravagant with us. He has lavished on us the riches of His grace. His grace towards us abounds and abounds and abounds.

Ephesians 1:3-8 ³“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love ⁵He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will— ⁶to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. ⁷In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸that He lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding...”

This describes what He has done for us. That was the attitude Mary reflected in her offering. And that is the attitude we ought to have.

2 Corinthians 2:14-15 ¹⁴“But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of Him everywhere. ¹⁵For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”

We are to reflect that same sort of extravagant, self-sacrificing love back to Him and to all we meet. We too are broken vessels pouring out the precious perfume of the gospel to those around us!

That’s how the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ is symbolised by an alabaster jar of precious perfume!

That’s how we can see the gospel in an alabaster jar!



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