

Extravagant Love

Mark 14:1-11

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What's the most lavish gift you've ever received? Of course there are the expensive gifts. Perhaps you had your parents give you a brand new car! Or, maybe someone gave you a house or a large inheritance. However, there are also gifts we receive that might not be expensive, but are nevertheless priceless, such as a family heirloom passed down to you like your grandmother's wedding ring or your grandfather's Bible. Still, other gifts are practically worthless to everyone else, but valuable to you, such as macaroni and glue craft item your son made when he was four or a birthday card scribed in love by your two year old. What ultimately matters is whether a gift comes from the heart of extravagant love.

As we look to Mark 14:1-11 this morning, we will see one woman give a gift of extravagant love to Jesus. This gift was an expensive family heirloom, given from a heart filled with a spirit of love and worship.

As we orient ourselves in the book of Mark, remember that the time of Jesus' death quickly approaches. It is his final week of his life. Having just finished prophesying to the disciples in the great teaching of the Olivet Discourse concerning the future coming of his kingdom, Jesus now begins to prepare for his death. Everything is in place. The religious leaders, with great hatred for Jesus, have now made plans to murder him, just two days before the feast of Passover, which opens up Mark 14. One of Jesus' own disciples, Judas, betrays Jesus and makes a deal to turn him over to the religious leaders for some money. The plot to kill and Judas' betrayal wrap around this lavish gift from this one woman. The Gospel writer bookends the woman's anointing of Jesus with the pressing reminder of Jesus' upcoming death. The shadow of the cross engulfs this dinner party. Thus, this woman's lavish gift takes on a deeper meaning than she may have realized. As Jesus will tell them, she's anointing his body for burial.

With this context established, we will focus our attention primarily on this woman's incredible gift. Her extravagant act of love to Jesus teaches us what it

means to truly love the Lord and worship him. In the sermon, we will discover that true devotion to Jesus must display extravagant love and sacrifice as an act of worship. As we work through the events of this dinner party, we first consider the gift; second, the rebuke; and third, the response. We will move quickly through those first two points, and spend most of our time on the third point, unpacking Jesus' defense of this woman's act and learning what it means to worship the Lord.

1. The Gift (v. 3)

Throughout this Passover week in Jerusalem, Jesus had been staying in Bethany right outside the city. On that evening, there was a formal dinner party arranged at the house of Simon the leper. Many have speculated over the exact identity of this man, but he appears to be a man healed by Jesus. This dinner party was his act of honoring Jesus for his healing. The disciples we're all at this dinner party, but also a few other followers of Jesus. In John's version of this account (John 12:1-8), he tells us that that Mary, Martha, and the resurrected Lazarus were there as well! Imagine the conversations they had around the dinner table that night, reclining together enjoying good food. I'm sure many were still wanting to discuss Jesus' prophecy at the Mount Olives over the destruction of the temple. Others kept asking Lazarus questions about what it was like to be dead and to come back to life. It was a party with some of Jesus' closest followers and most devoted companions.

During this dinner, a woman gets up to go get a alabaster flask. Mark leaves the identity of this woman a secret, a chooses to keep her anonymous. However, John tells us exactly who this woman was. This was Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus! Mary takes this alabaster flask and breaks it open, revealing an expensive ointment. This ointments origins was most likely derive from a plant extract all the over in India. It was a lavish and expensive family heirloom. Yet, Mary, filled with great love for Jesus is inspired to present Jesus with an extravagant act of love. She breaks the alabaster flask and begins anointing Jesus with it. John tells us that she began to wipe his feet with her hair and that "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

Anyone who has ever sought to do anything of significance for Jesus knows that criticism quickly follows. When you publicly, lavishly, and foolishly sacrifice for Jesus as an act of love, the critics will be ready to call you a moron. The same

happens to Mary. With selfless abandon she gives this gift to Jesus, but those at the party are quick to rebuke her.

2. The Rebuke (v. 4-5)

Mark attributes the rebuke to the disciples, but John gives us the one who was leading the charge—Judas. Judas was known for being a penny pincher. He loved wealth and money. He embezzled money from the ministry fund of Jesus and would turn Jesus over to the chief priests for a few pieces of silver.

Considering the value of that alabaster ointment, Judas is appalled at such a waste! We are told that this ointment could have been sold for three hundred denarii. Remember, a denarii was about one day's wage. With some simple calculations, an ointment like this would cost the equivalent of twenty to thirty thousand dollars! This is a *very* lavish gift, and worst of all it seems so impractical. Judas argues that the ointment could have been put better use by being sold, and given to the poor. Now Judas himself didn't care about the poor, his comments were empty words that he thought Jesus would approve of. After all John tells us that "He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:6). However, Mark indicates that there were other disciples who had similar thoughts to Judas. Wouldn't this gift be better used in caring for the needy rather than wasting it on Jesus? Isn't this women begin foolish? After all, Jesus has been so vocal about caring for the poor, many of the disciples thought that Jesus would approve of their rebuke of Mary's lavish gift. However, much to the She grin, Jesus defends the use of Mary's lavish act of extravagant love.

3. The Response (v. 6-9)

Now we get into Jesus' response, and here we begin to learn what true devotion to Jesus looks, what it means to to truly worship him. Let me share with. You four truths we learn about acts of love towards Jesus.

A. Acts of Worship Done from a Heart of Love are Beautiful to Jesus.

As with everything in the Christian faith, our acts of worship come down to the motivation and love of our hearts. Of course, anyone can go through the motions of worship—the Scribes and Pharisees were experts! Yet, true worship begins deep in our heart and bursts forth in external expression.

Mary spontaneously decides to lavish Jesus with this gift, led by the Spirit to do so. She was so moved from the depths of our hearts, that she acted with no thought of what others would say. She worshipped Jesus no matter the cost of the ointment, and she worshiped Jesus the only way she knew how.

When the disciples, led by Judas, begin rebuking Mary for wasting this expensive ointment, Jesus defends her. “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” Though her act of devotion seemed ridiculous and irresponsible to the watching disciples, Jesus sees Mary’s heart and sees her act of extravagant love as something beautiful.

You see, this lavish gift reveals Mary’s ultimate love. She *treasured* Christ. She loved him with every fiber of her being. She didn’t care about the cost and she didn’t care about opinions, she felt compelled to express her love to Christ in the best way she knew how.

When was the last time you expressed your love for Christ with this sort of reckless abandon? Have you ever done this? Have you sought to serve him a great financial cost? Have you sought to serve him, apathetic to the critics who look for fault? Does your worship to Jesus come deeply from a heart filled with love? If your heart is filled with love for Christ, you will find yourself at times transfixed by Jesus, captivated by his majesty, and compelled to display your love for him. Expressing that love can take various forms, but acts of worship sourced from a heart captivated by Jesus will always be beautiful to him. He relishes in the joyous expression of praise from his people.

B. Acts of Worship Are Not Always Practical

We also learn that acts of worship don’t have to be practical. Jesus tells the disciples that “you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.” Now, Jesus isn’t telling us to ignore the poor. Rather, the Scriptures emphasize that we are to care for

the “widow and the orphan.” Jesus tells us that whatever you do for the least of these, you do to me! One of the ways we express our love to Jesus, is by caring for other people, particularly the poor.

However, our acts of service to Jesus aren’t always “practical,” and nor should they be. Like the disciples, we tend to be overly pragmatic and functional. We don’t want to waste time, resources, and energy when it could be better used on other purposes. Stewarding resources well is important, and Jesus isn’t minimizing that. Yet, we can give gifts to Jesus that don’t have a ton of immediate utility.

What are these impractical forms of worship that we can give to Jesus today? It’s artistic expression. Art has no functional purpose, but ought to express the true and the beautiful. For a Christian, captivated by the Lord Jesus Christ, artistic expression is a common way to express extravagant love to Jesus. Express your love to Jesus by writing a novel, composing a hymn, painting a painting, sculpting clay, or writing a poem. These art forms can be powerful expressions of love to Jesus.

Sadly, Christians today tend to be more like Martha, busy accomplishing something productive, than like Mary, carefully sitting at the feet of Jesus. We resist impractical expressions of faith, because they seem to be squandering time and money. Yet, we need more Mary’s who anoint Christ in the sweet aroma of artistic expression!

Where are the great Christian artists today? Who is our generation’s John Bunyan who can capture the trials and joys of the Christian life with his pen? Who is our generation’s Johann Sebastian Bach who will compose a symphony to seduce our ears with the melodies of heaven? Where is our generation’s Rembrandt who will capture the beauty of God’s world with paint on a canvas?

In many ways, Christians in the last century have distanced themselves from the art, and have not striven for excellence in them. We’ve abdicated such artistic expression to those who do not know God. Thus, much of the art we observe today fails to capture the true and the beautiful. We need Christians who can use their artistic gifts in a way that extravagantly displays their love for God, and who through their art convince that the true and the beautiful is found in God himself.

Let me encourage you to use your artistic expression and give it to Jesus. Though few of us will ever be professional artists (though some of us might!), artistic expression is a beautiful way to communicate your love to Christ. If your musically inclined, compose a hymn for Jesus. If your a write, pen a poem. If your a painting, paint to the glory of God. If your a photographer, capture the beauty of God's world for his glory. If your a film maker, communicate the truth of God through your cinematography and script writing, telling stories that point to the meta-narrative of Scripture. May the artists among us arise to commit themselves to their work. Yes, your work might not be "practical," but if your art is birthed from a deep love of Jesus, he will find your work beautiful. When was the last time you did something beautiful for Jesus?

C. Acts of Worship Should Be Lavish and Sacrificial.

We give to Jesus all of our heart, not half of it. If Christ is our treasure, we hold nothing back from him. All that we are, every talent, every minute, every dollar is utilized for the glory of Jesus. Just like Mary, when our hearts swell with love for Jesus, we hold nothing back in expressing that love. She gave no thought to the value of the alabaster ointment; she just longed to express her love to Christ. She poured out this prized family treasure as she poured out her love to ultimate treasure.

If your heart treasures Christ, it will be expressed in lavish and sacrificial ways. You'll long to serve Jesus, no matter the cost. You'll give generously and financially to see his kingdom advance. You'll sacrifice your time and energy to express your love through service. You will wake up early just to be with him in prayer.

How do you express your love to Christ? What acts of worship communicates Christ is your treasure? In what ways can your devotion to Jesus increase?

Our service to Christ must burst forth from a heart of love. You can't force yourself to love Christ lavishly or will yourself to love him more deeply. Rather, lavish sacrifice is the natural result of extravagant love. So question is, how can I increase my love to Christ? The answer is simple. You sit at his feet. You meditate upon all the promises of the Gospel. You let your mind dwell on all the goodness that is in Christ. You set your mind on the revealed word of God, and let the Spirit stoke the fires of your heart as you become captivated by the

beauty of Jesus. With your heart aflame by the Spirit, you will eagerly long to serve Jesus lavishly and sacrificially. The reason our devotion to Christ is so weak, is because our love for him is weak. We must develop the habits of mind and heart to refuel our love for Jesus by meditating not he person and work of the Son of God. You should do this daily, through reading the Scriptures, prayer, and meditation. These are the spiritual practices that fuel the Christians heart to love God. Thus, lavish and sacrificial service to God comes naturally.

It's easy in a sermon like this to feel convicted over your lack of service to Jesus, so you begin to guilt yourself into some lavish act of service by sheer force of will. Yet, that is to miss the point completely! If you lack devotion to Jesus, do not go and do, but sit and listen. Recline at the table with Jesus every day, and your heart will organically and of its own volition serve him.

D. Acts of Worship Engulfs Our Story into Christ's Story.

In his defense of this woman, Jesus tells us that, "Truly, I say to you, whoever the gospel is proclaimed int he whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Mary's incredible gift of love is now permanently conjoined to the Gospel story, and her act of extravagant love has been an inspiration to many, including us this morning!

When you love and serve Jesus like this, your life becomes bound up in his. Your small, insignificant life begins to take on new layers of meaning. The small acts of worship we give in love to Jesus take on greater purpose than we could ever imagine possible. Your life is engulfed by the story of Jesus. As you share your testimony, the story of your life with others, Jesus is the hero. The legacy and memory of a life lived in faith becomes a testimony to Jesus power and purpose in the Gospel. Your story will never be forgotten if your story is bound to Jesus. A life lived in extravagant love to Jesus will leave a legacy that far outlasts our own life time.

What will our children and grandchildren remember about us when we're gone? Are we leaving for them a legacy of extravagant love to Jesus? I we demonstrating how eager we long to sacrifice for Christ?

Final Thoughts

Though Mary didn't realize it at the time, her act of love took on more significance than she realized—she was anointing his body for burial. With the cross looming over Jesus, with the religious leaders conspiring to kill him and Judas preparing to betray him, here we see a costly act of love to Jesus reminding us of why he came. The time of Jesus death quickly approaches. Before long he will hang suspended on the cross, naked, beaten, and bruised. Christ prepares to show us just how extravagant and costly his love is for us. His heart beats heavily for you, and he loves you. He gives up his life for the forgiveness of your sin. As you feel the weight of God's love this morning, may it encourage you to love him in return. Turn from your sins this morning, and trust in Jesus as your savior and Lord. Bind the story of your life to Christ. May your life be found in him as you love him and serve him as he has loved and served you.