

**Mark 14: 1-9, Matthew 26: 6-13, and John 12: 1-8; “The Alabaster Box of Ointment”,
Sermon # 108 in the series –“Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor
Paul Rendall on April 13th, 2014, in the Morning Worship Service.**

We have here one of the most touching scenes in all of the gospel narratives; a woman who came to Jesus with an alabaster box of ointment which was very costly; and she broke it and poured it on His head. In the next few minutes I would like to attempt to show you the immense spiritual significance of her actions, which are so highly commended by our Lord Jesus. The actions of this woman, whom we know from the gospel of John was His dear friend Mary, show us how highly our Lord Jesus thought of her lavish display of love to Him as her Lord. This is the truth that I want to open up to you at this hour; Christ’s knowing the meaning of all of her thoughts, and all of her actions, in the following 3 ways. 1st of all – Our Lord knew that she was preparing for His death and burial. 2nd – Our Lord knew that the alabaster box was a picture of her heart and the preciousness of His grace. And 3rd – He knew that her actions would be misunderstood, but that He would vindicate her. I pray that these thoughts as I develop them will be blessed to each person here today so that they will be able to understand better how to respond to Christ’s dying love to them.

1st of all – Our Lord knew, that when Mary came bringing this alabaster box, that she was preparing Him and herself for His death and burial.

Verse 1 says: “After two days it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.” “And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take Him by trickery and put Him to death.” And, in verse 8, Jesus says, “She has done what she could.” “She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial.” Even though Mary did not know exactly when and how her Lord would fall into the hands of wicked men and be put to death, she knew that it must be coming soon, because He had so often spoken of it. Everything to her seemed to point to it. And, even if others did not seem to comprehend it, she being led by the Holy Spirit, knew for sure in her heart, that all of Jesus’ words were going to come true and they would have their highest fulfillment in His death. And so she wanted to show her love for Him while there was yet a little time. She wanted to honor Him while she could. This incident took place, it says here, at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany, as Jesus sat at table. There is some question in the minds of commentators as to whether the incident recorded in Matthew and Mark is the same incident which is recorded in the gospel of John, chapter 12. I believe that it is. The idea that there would be two women who would perform the same action of coming to Jesus with an expensive alabaster box and breaking it and pouring it on Him, within such a short period of time, just before His crucifixion, and Jesus giving the same rebuke to Judas and to the disciples twice, is unimaginable to me. No, I am quite sure that one rebuke would have been enough for at least eleven of them. It is true that there is mention made in John’s gospel of Mary’s anointing the feet of Jesus, as well as His head, with the fragrant oil; but this would not of itself necessitate our having to conclude that it was two separate incidents. It could be that she started with pouring some of it on His head, and then also, a moment later, poured some on His feet, and wiped His feet with her hair. I believe that John was drawn by the Holy Spirit to focus on her anointing of His feet for a particular reason, just as I believe that Matthew and Mark were drawn to focus on her anointing His head, for another reason. All of these things are complementary; they are not contradictory.

Then there is the matter of the timing. In Mark it says, “After two days it was the Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.” In John it says: “Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, and there they made Him a supper.” It appears to be two different days, four days apart from each other, when you first look at it. But listen to Matthew Poole. He says: “It is very probable that Matthew, and Mark, and John recite the same story. They agree it to have happened in Bethany, at a supper in Simon’s house; they agree in the kind of the ointment, and in our

Savior's discourse upon the thing." "The difference in the time, John mentioning six days before the Passover, and Matthew two days, will be cleared by considering, that St. John sets down the precise time when our Saviour came to Bethany, which was six days before the passover; St. Matthew sets down the time when the feast was made, which was two days before the Passover; so that our Saviour had been four days in Bethany before he was entertained in the house of Simon, and anointed by Mary for his burial." (End of Quote) I believe that this does account for the seeming discrepancy between the accounts, and settles the matter as to whether there was more than one incident of a woman coming to Jesus and anointing His head and His feet just before the Passover. They are the same incident, related from the perspective of three different disciples.

It was Jesus' dear friend Mary who came and "did this good deed" for Jesus. The supper that Jesus was attending was held at the house of Simon the Leper, probably a man who had been healed of his leprosy by Jesus; and he was now so very grateful for it, that he invited Jesus and the twelve to his house for a meal. Martha was serving, and Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him." Mary was also very thankful for all that Jesus had done for her, and for her brother Lazarus. There had been a brief time, when she had doubted Jesus' ability to do all things at the right time. It was a few days before this, when her brother had been sick unto death, and Jesus had not come in time to prevent him from dying. Jesus had deliberately waited until Lazarus had died, and then went to Bethany. If you look over at John 11: 32 you will see Mary's faith being tried. "Then, when Mary came to where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'" You see, she believed in His power to heal Lazarus. It was not this that she doubted. She simply could not understand why Jesus had not come sooner, after they had sent Him word that Lazarus was sick. Verse 33 says - "Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled." "And He said, 'Where have you laid him?'" "They said to Him, 'Lord come and see.'" "Jesus wept." Now, I believe that Jesus wept for two reasons. First, because He truly sympathized with Martha and Mary and the other Jews who loved Lazarus; He truly understood and sympathized with the sorrow of the loss of a loved one, and the predicament of death. But there was another reason that He groaned as well. It was because not all understood how important it was that they engage their faith in Him at that very point of their loss. Verse 36 says, "Then the Jews said, 'See how He loved him!'" "And some of them said, 'Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?'"

There it is; if He really loved Lazarus, some of the Jews were thinking, if He had really thought about what He could have done for Lazarus a few days ago, He would have come and healed him then, at that critical point. I think that this was the reason for Jesus' groaning. But we need to see that Jesus' timing was perfect then, and it is perfect now for those who are trusting in Him. It says in verse 38 - "Then Jesus again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb." "It was a cave, and a stone lay against it." "Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'" "Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, 'Lord by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.'" "Jesus said to her, 'Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?'" You see, this is the greatest issue in regard to your faith. Do you believe the word of Jesus when things have not gone well for your loved one? Will you even then believe that you will see the glory of God? Or will you hold to your own doubts and fears? If you believe in Jesus you will see the glory of His grace and power working on your behalf! Verse 41 - "Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying." "And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank You that You that You have heard me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.'" "Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!'" "And he who had died came out, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth." "Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go.'" You would think that all present would have immediately believed. But they did not. Verse 45 says: "Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the

things Jesus did, believed in Him.” “But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did.”

You see, for some, this incident of healing Lazarus did not issue in their believing, but rather it caused them to run to the Pharisees to tell them; which news would cause them to think about how they could seize him and put Him to death. What was proof of Jesus’ being the Messiah and His words being true, only provoked them to greater envy and to plot His death. But with Mary she beheld the glory of God and believed. Are you not glad that the Lord Jesus knew what was going on in Mary’s heart? And are you not glad that He knows what is going on in your heart as well? He knew all the thoughts and all the motives for what Mary was doing, even if no one else did. My sincere Christian friends, He knows the same in you, and reads the thoughts of your heart as a book. “She has done what she could.” “She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial.” Ask yourself, dear Christian, do you do what you can to show forth your love for Christ and His finished work of redemption on the cross for you? The Lord Jesus takes notice of all the good thoughts of your heart toward Him and His cause of truth and righteousness and justice.

2nd – We can say that our Lord knew that the alabaster box which Mary brought was a picture of her heart, and it was preaching the gospel.

Verse 3 – “And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard.” “Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.” And verse 9 – “Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.” John, in his gospel, Chapter 12, adds in verse 3 – “Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair.” “And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.” This was no doubt a very profound picture of the love of Mary for her Savior, as she anticipated Jesus’ going to the cross to die. It no doubt had the most profound impact on all who were sitting at the table with Jesus. It was the literal fulfillment of Song of Solomon 1, verse 12 – “While the king is at his table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance.” Her actions were a picture of her responding to all that He had taught her about Himself. Jesus was willingly going to the cross, and somehow Mary knew that His full obedience to his Father, in going to the place of suffering and death, was going to have a much greater impact on all of them than they were presently willing to understand or to acknowledge. Mary did what she did, pouring the oil of His head, pouring the oil on His feet, unashamedly in the presence of them all. She did not do this simply on her own behalf. She did it on behalf of all of the disciples, would the truth be known. She certainly knew that this was the right way to show forth her own personal thankfulness for all that Jesus had shown her of His power and His love and His grace. But her anointing the Lord Jesus was more than for herself, even. It was on behalf of all of them, if they only knew. She did not want Jesus to have to die, but she somehow she knew that Jesus must die.

She remembered His words which are recorded in a number of places in the gospels. Mark 9: 31 – “For He taught His disciples and said to them, ‘The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him.’” “And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.” “But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him.” Mark 10: 45 – “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Matthew 26: 2 – “You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” These were the words which were ringing in Mary’s mind at that time. She was coming to know this gospel, and now she would preach it in her actions by pouring the fragrant spikenard oil on her Savior’s head. She was saying, “Jesus is God’s anointed.” He is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” If Jesus must go to the cross, she reasoned to herself, it must be in relation to all of His people. If Jesus is going to the cross, it must be for me. If Jesus is going to the cross, He will die a horrible death, but He will rise again. This must be for me, and it must be for all of His people. I think that the words of Jonathan Edwards will be very helpful here: “This act of the woman’s was not worthy in itself to be made so much of, but in the eye of the grace of

Christ it was a great thing; for he saw the love that she did it from.” “And the graces of the saints are exceeding precious in his eyes, for his heart is ravished with [them]. Canticles 4:9, “Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.” “Another reason that may be given of it is this: that without doubt there is some spiritual thing signified and represented by this act of the woman.” “I don't mean that she intended to represent any spiritual thing by it, or that she understood any mystical signification in her own act. But without doubt, as this act of hers was ordered in divine providence, and as she was moved to it by the Spirit of God, and as it is recorded in sacred history, there is some mystery concealed in the story.” “So Christ compares the graces of his spouse to sweet perfumed ointments in Canticles 4:10, “How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse!” “How much better is thy love than wine!” “And the smell of thine ointments than all spices!” “As Mary's ointment was very precious and costly, so is that grace that is in the heart of a saint.” “It is a most precious thing and very costly.” It cost a great price.” All the silver and gold in the world would not have purchased it.” “It cost Christ's precious blood.” “Mary poured her sweet ointment upon Christ; so does the grace that is in the heart of a saint, when in exercise, flow out to the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Christ is anointed by the church as Jacob anointed the pillar, and as all Israel anointed David.” (End of Quote)

We can go farther than this yet. Mary, at the very time that she poured forth the precious ointment out of the alabaster box, poured forth divine love towards Christ out of a pure heart. The alabaster box itself was made of a very unusual substance. It was very white and very pure looking. So, as we think of the believing people of God, they are characterized by our Lord Himself as being pure in heart. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” In other words, Mary was a fit representation of all those Christians who are pure in heart. Listen to Jonathan Edwards again: “All the saints, with respect to the guilt of sin, are already perfectly pure; they are perfectly washed from all guilt in the blood of Christ.” “And as to sincerity, they have pure hearts.” “In conversion God creates in men a clean heart, and renews in them a right spirit.” “And when the work of sanctification that is begun in them is finished, then their hearts shall be as clean and pure as alabaster, perfectly free from all stain of sin, and shall be presented to Christ without spot or {blemish}.” “Thus it is out of a pure heart that the saints do pour forth the exercises of divine love towards Jesus Christ.” Let me give you one more observation which I have gleaned from Edwards on this text. He says: “Mary poured forth this precious ointment on Christ out of a broken box.” “So true grace flows out of a broken [heart].” “Believers don't only pour forth the exercises of grace out of a pure heart.” “True Christian grace and divine love always flows out of a broken heart, a heart broken with a sense {of sin}.” “And the heart of a saint never sends forth such a sweet savor as when it is most broken and contrite.” “This is evidenced by Psalms 34:18, “The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit”; and Psalms 51:17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” Isaiah 57:15, “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones”; and Isaiah 66:1-02, “Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?” “For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.” “And grace never gives as sweet a savor to the believer himself.” (End of Quote, Taken from His sermon on Mark 14: 3 – “Mary's Remarkable Act”, preached in 1739.)

This most remarkable anointing of Jesus by Mary represents the love of all sincere believers in Him who want to honor Him for what He would do for them; those looking forward to the cross in Old Testament times, and what He would do for them; those looking back upon His finished work of obedience and sufferings, who have believed in Him since He suffered, died, and rose again on their behalf. Let each of us rejoice today that Mary was led by the Spirit to do this good work. It

was a good work done for Christ, and it was a good work done on our behalf as well. Let us ask ourselves whether we are ashamed or unashamed of the gospel which Mary preached that day in picture form. More love to Thee, O Christ! More love to Thee! I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who will believe, and to all who have a broken heart over their many sins.

And then finally – Our Lord Jesus knew that her actions would be misunderstood, but that He would vindicate her before them all.

Verse 4 says – “But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, ‘Why was this fragrant oil wasted?’ ‘For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.’ “And they criticized her sharply.” Matthew 26: 8 says – “But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, ‘Why this waste?’ “For this oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor.” John’s gospel says – “”But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, who would betray Him said, ‘Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor.’ “This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.” These verses are really quite revealing, are they not? The whole criticism of Mary’s lavish action of anointing our Lord Jesus with this oil, originated from him. And the reason that it came from him was two-fold, John tells us. Judas had treachery in his heart and would betray Christ; and also, he was a covetous man and a thief. He immediately knew the earthly value of the ointment; it was worth 300 denarii. And he thought that this lavish display of love, and the honor she bestowed upon Christ, was a waste. The ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Not that he cared for the poor, John says, he cared for himself alone. He had the money box, and he used to take what was put in it. And, he would go on to betray and sell His Lord for 30 pieces of silver. O beware of covetousness, dear listener. Beware of not giving to Christ, the honor that is due Him. Beware of letting your love for Him grow cold. Ask yourself what your reaction would have been that day if you were there, and this false argument was put forward by Judas. Would you have sympathized with it? Would you have gone along with it? Would you have criticized Mary sharply? Evidently some of the true disciples of Christ did. It looked to them as though Mary were doing a very wasteful and selfish thing. The text says, “They criticized her sharply.” But all of this sinful criticism started in treacherous heart of a man who would betray Christ.

Let us understand that Jesus sees the motives and the reasons for all that we do, very clearly. If our offerings, or our gifts, or our tokens of appreciation and honor are done for Him, or for ourselves He knows it; whether we are lavishly wasting what could have been given to the poor, or honoring His Person, His word, and His powerful grace. Mary was doing all of this. And yet she was being criticized. Jesus says to them, “Let her alone.” “She has kept this for the day of My burial.” John Calvin says: “For the day of my burial she hath kept it.” “When he says, that the ointment was kept, he means that it was not poured unseasonably, but with a due regard to the time when it occurred; for a thing is said to be kept, which is reserved in store to be brought out at a fit time and place.” “It is certain that, if any person, at a former period, had burdened him with costly delicacies, he would not have endured it.” “But he affirms that Mary did not do this as a customary matter, but in order to discharge her last duty towards him. Besides, the anointing of bodies was not at that time a useless ceremony, but rather a spiritual symbol, to place before their eyes the hope of a resurrection.” “The promises were still obscure; Christ had not risen, who is justly designated the first-fruits of them that rise, (1st Corinthians 15:20.) Believers, therefore, needed such aids to direct them to Christ, who was still absent; and, accordingly, the anointing of Christ was not at that time superfluous, for he was soon to be buried, and he was anointed as if he were to be laid in the tomb. Jesus knew exactly what Mary was doing, and He approved of it and commended it as a good deed done for Him. Let us ask ourselves; are we doing what we do for the glory of ourselves, to make me look good, or are we doing it for Him, to honor every memory of His precious name?

Jeremiah Burroughs in his book, "The Excellency of a Gracious Spirit", says this - "Thus it is in many men's religion: self-ends are the operative ingredients in what they do, and the show of obedience to God is but that which gives the color." "That which they do may have the better appearance." "It is impossible that a man who seeks himself should come up to the fullness of spirit that is required in following the Lord." "In Hosea 10: 1 it is said that Israel is an empty vine." "Why so?" "He bringeth forth fruit unto himself." "He brings forth fruit but yet is empty, because he brings it forth unto himself." "Where self-ends are the chief movers, there is no further latitude or degree of godliness minded, but such as may be serviceable unto them." "Now they cannot but be low, strait, and narrow in comparison to those who lift God in all they do." "Therefore their profession must be empty and scant, not full and powerful as it is in the other." "A self-seeking heart is always an empty heart, but a gracious heart is fruitful in all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old." "And what is the reason?" "I have laid them up for thee, O my beloved." (Song of Solomon 7: 13) "Observe the difference: Israel is an empty vine; he brings forth fruit to himself." "But the church here brings forth all manner of pleasant fruit, for she lays them up for her beloved." "She brings them not forth for herself, as Israel did." (P. 181, of *The Excellency of a Gracious Spirit* by Jeremiah Burroughs)

I would say that this is what Mary did. She had "kept this ointment for the day of Christ's burial", but she thought better of waiting that long. When the Holy Spirit moved in her heart she knew that it would be better, no it would be the best, to show her love to Him right then and honor Him right then. She would give to Him what was most precious to herself, now. Let me ask you, dear believer, if this is you? What are you waiting for? You may have laid up much for yourself, but can you pour it out on Christ; His Person and His kingdom work, the furtherance of His gospel, when you see that it is needed? Let me close with a short paragraph from the biography of Fanny Newell. She was called to be the wife of a Methodist traveling evangelist named E. F. Newell in the early 1800s. This is what she says: "O my parents, pray for me, that I may be supported under whatever trial I may be called to pass, and glorify God in my soul and body which His." "And may we all seek an entire conformity to the mind and will of God; and prove the depth, the height, the length, and breadth of the love of God, which passeth all understanding." "We expect to sail tomorrow for St. Croix." "I leave my native land, and for what?" "To gain silver and gold?" "No!" "Money could not tempt me to make the sacrifice I do." "What then am I going for?" "I answer, to encourage a preacher of the Gospel; and help in the great and glorious work of winning souls to Christ!" "And although I may pass deep waters of affliction, I have no dread, because I trust in the Lord; for in the Lord Jehovah, is everlasting strength." "Although death may be near, and the grave at my feet, I trust in the Lord to land me safe, where the waves of trouble will cease to roar, and the tempest be forever calm." In another letter she says, quoting a poem, "If such a worm as I can spread a common Savior's name; nor sin, nor Satan can I fear, with Jesus in my view." She says: "A woman when Christ was on earth broke a box of precious ointment, and poured it on his head!" "And there were some that found fault!" "But our Lord said, 'Let her alone, she has wrought a good work on me; she has done what she could.'" "The Lord would accept of us if we did what we could small as our mites might be." "I feel the importance of working while the day lasts, for the night (death) cometh, wherein no man can work." Let us learn from this passage to do what we can while we can, for our Lord Jesus, and to bear the criticisms of selfish men. Let us bring the alabaster box of our heart, and break it in His presence, and pour out the precious ointment of our love and praise and honor and good works unto His holy name.