

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

She Has Done A Beautiful Thing

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Mark 14:1-11

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Mark 14:1; that's on page 850 in your pew Bibles. As you find that, let me remind you that we are in the final week of Jesus' life – he is in Jerusalem participating in the festivities leading up to Passover. If we compare Mark's version of this story with John's version it seems that Jesus is staying in the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus – whom he raised from the dead – a house belonging to a person named “Simon the Leper” whom we assume was their father.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

1 It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, 2 for they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.”

3 And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. 4 There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. 9 And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. 11 And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.
(Mark 14:1–11 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

This passage that we have just read is a classic example of what scholars call “the sandwich structure”. We’ve seen this before – sandwich structure is a very common Jewish storytelling technique. It refers to a form of arrangement whereby the stuff in the middle explains the stuff on the margins. In this case the “stuff in the middle” is the story about the woman who anoints Jesus with perfume – the “stuff on the margins” has to do with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Meaning that this story is put in the Bible to explain why Judas abandoned Jesus. Certainly there was other stuff going on – but this story is presented as the straw that broke the camel’s back. Something happened here that pushed Judas over the edge and finally outside of the Kingdom of God.

That’s why it’s in the Bible.

Just zoom out a little bit – again this is why you should not read your Bible on your phone – you cannot see this on a 3 inch screen. You have to have an actual BIBLE open in front of you to see this. Zoom out. Look at chapter 14 as a whole. It starts with this story – the climax of which is Judas agreeing to betray Jesus. Then look at the next story. You’ve got the Passover and Last Supper during which Judas ACTUALLY betrays Jesus. Then you have Jesus predicting Peter’s denial, you have the disciples falling asleep while Jesus prays, then you have the arrest of Jesus, the flight of the disciples, the trial of Jesus and the final denial of Peter.

At the start of Mark 14 everything is as it has always been. Jesus is being Jesus. He is in Jerusalem, teaching, opposed by the leaders, adored by the crowds and spending quality time with his disciples. By the end of chapter 14 he is standing alone, having betrayed and abandoned by all. That is why scholars often give this chapter the title: “The Abandonment Of Jesus” – that is what this section of the Bible is about.

So what is this story about a passionate woman and her extravagant worship doing here?

It is explaining why the first disciple went away.

It is a story about OFFENSE that leads to abandonment.

That's what this is about – and again, we tend to miss that when we chop the Bible up into iddy, biddy pieces.

So let's try and see this story with fresh eyes. Let's try and see it in the frame that Mark has given it and let's ask the question I think we are supposed to ask:

Why Was This Incident So Offensive?

And to be clear it wasn't just Judas who was offended. I would hate for you to think that the answer to the question: why was this incident so offensive was simply that Judas was a jerk – Judas may well have been a jerk – but he was not alone in being OFFENDED. Look at the text. When this woman – whom we presume to be Mary the sister of Lazarus – broke the jar of perfume and poured it over the body of Jesus – multiple people in the house was offended! Look at verse 4:

There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. (Mark 14:4–5 ESV)

And it wasn't just the guests – the outsiders who didn't know any better – Matthew tells us that it was the DISCIPLES THEMSELVES who were offended. He says:

And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” (Matthew 26:8–9 ESV)

The disciples were offended.

The guests were offended – a great many people were offended – so we need to try and figure out why. I think 4 reasons are suggested in the text. I think the first one is the most obvious:

1. Because it prioritized worship over charity

William Lane says helpfully here:

“It was natural for them to think in terms of provision for the poor, for it was customary on the evening of Passover

to remember the poor with gifts.”¹

Listen, the worship of God – Old Testament and New has always involved an emphasis on caring for the poor. No one is denying that – no one could deny that. I mean if you aren’t in some way, in some capacity caring for the poor then you are almost certainly not a Christian – is that going too far? I don’t think so. In the Old Testament it says:

Blessed is the one who considers the poor! (Psalms 41:1 ESV)

James the brother of Jesus says:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14–17 ESV)

So Old Testament and New if your faith doesn’t include care for the poor then it just isn’t real – it isn’t pleasing to God – it isn’t saving. Can such faith save you, James asks. The implied answer is NO. Faith that does not include care for the poor is unsaving.

So caring for the poor – is super important.

But.

It is not ULTIMATE.

And some people in this story found that hard to receive.

This woman designated a gift worth about \$70,000 in today’s terms – it was probably her life savings – people of that day didn’t have GICs they stored wealth in stable commodities like pure nard – so in our terminology – she has just cashed in her life’s savings and instead of giving them to the poor she has designated them for worship.

And people are offended.

¹ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 493.

This money could have built a house for a poor family – it could have fed widows in the neighbourhood for a year – and instead she poured it all out on Jesus as an act of gratitude and worship – and they were offended.

But Jesus commends her.

He says that she has done it right. She has chosen the best thing. She has her priorities straight. As good as charity is – as required as it is – as commendable as it is – it is and can never be ULTIMATE.

Worship is ultimate.

Charity is secondary.

Mission is secondary.

John Piper says it well as he often does – he says “Mission exists because worship doesn’t”.

Do you hear that?

He says we do mission because there are people out there who aren’t worshipping – and they ought to. They ought to know that God is good. They ought to know that God cares for them. They ought to know his kindness that leads to repentance – that’s why we do charity – that’s why we do mission to TURN ON ADDITIONAL WORSHIPPERS.

Mission exists because worship doesn’t.

Charity exists because worship doesn’t.

So – catch the implication friends – we ought ONLY to do mission and we ought only to do charity that creates and compels worship! We don’t do SECRET SANTA – WE DO SHINING JESUS! We give a cup of cold water IN JESUS’ NAME – why? Because mission exists because

worship doesn't.

Are you seeing that priority?

She did. This woman did – but the disciples didn't, that's why they were offended.

The second thing I think we can say is that they were offended because this incident:

2. Because it gave recognition and prominence to a woman

In Jewish society in Jesus' day women were not supposed to interrupt men when they were eating or talking – they were supposed to be quiet and they were supposed to serve the food but otherwise they were supposed to exist at the margins – but here is this woman interrupting what I'm sure was a very interesting conversation. She forced her way in and made herself the centre of attention. She distracted Jesus – broke his train of thought and brought the conversation to a crashing halt and they were annoyed.

But Jesus wasn't.

In fact he made her the hero of the story.

He said:

“Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me... truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” (Mark 14:6–9 ESV)

It is incredible how often women are held up as an example of faith and virtue in the Gospels. Judaism did not do that. One of the ancient morning prayers – called a “Dawn Blessing” that was prayed by pious Jewish men in the morning said:

“Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe who has not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman”.

That was the attitude of those men in that room on that day – but it was not the attitude of Jesus. Again and again and again, Jesus points to women and he says to his disciples – you should have faith like her. James Edwards put it this way, he says:

Women play especially important roles in the Gospel of Mark (1:1–16:8). Not only are they mentioned frequently, but the highest acclaim of Jesus in the Second Gospel goes to women.²

I think that's important for us to see – and to SAY – particularly today on Mothers' Day. In the conservative – Bible believing – wing of the evangelical church today we are working so hard to defend the “different” part of our doctrine with respect to men and women – we believe that men and women are equal BUT DIFFERENT – we are working so hard to preserve that “but different” in a culture that minimizes and diminishes and denies even the reality of gender – that maybe we are in danger of losing the EQUAL part of that. Because the whole thing matters. We believe that men and women are EQUAL but different.

This text reminds us that not only are men and women equal – but very often – the women are the most spiritually perceptive people in the room.

You can be offended by that if you like – almost everyone in this story was.

The third thing I think we can say is that they were offended because this incident:

3. Because it seemed to validate extreme emotionalism and sentimentality

The text draws attention to the extravagance and demonstrative nature of this woman's worship. Look at verse 3:

a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. (Mark 14:3 ESV)

Ok, that's ridiculous! She BROKE the flask – she didn't unscrew or uncork the flask and pour some of the oil on his feet – which might not have offended everyone present. That would have been measured, discreet and APPROPRIATE.

²James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 417.

But she didn't do that – she went over the top. She became ENTHUSIASTIC.

She BROKE THE JAR – as an obvious symbol of her intention to SPEND IT ALL on Jesus. And then she did. She poured it out – ON HIS HEAD. There is no way that goes unnoticed. If Jesus had been talking at the time – he would have had bubbles coming out of his mouth and he would have had to wipe his eyes – this was a giant SHOWY DISTRACTION.

And it was annoying.

To some.

But again – not to Jesus.

Apparently – it's ok to be super demonstrative in your worship – if it is a legitimate overflow of a thankful heart. Again, by comparing with John's version of the story we can identify this woman as Mary the sister of Lazarus. Meaning – this is the woman who very recently saw Jesus raise her brother from the dead.

That's why she was so excited.

That's the authentic reason behind her emotional display.

She is overwhelmed with gratitude.

And that's ok – that's good – Jesus says so – but the disciples are offended.

One commentator put it this way:

The world has never had a problem with religion in moderation. It has no problem with too much wealth or power or sex or influence, but it has a problem with too much religion. That is evident here.³

³James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 414-415.

That is exactly right!

No one will ever get offended if you are a little bit Christian. You know? If you go to church occasionally. If you put a reasonable sum in the collection plate. If you volunteer – twice a month. If you keep 8 of the 10 commandments. If you are accept most of what the Bible says – or even better some. If you worship in a reasonable and moderate fashion. If you raise one hand, carefully bent at the elbow.

No one will be offended by that.

That is reasonable and moderate and very much to our collective taste.

But this woman was enthusiastic and sentimental. She was oozing emotion and that made many of the men in the room uncomfortable.

And Jesus tells them to zip it.

You don't get to impose your masculine, rational, boringness on the liturgical life of the church.

That's a handy dandy reminder; and we'll come back to it in a minute.

But before we do we'll have to take a look at the fourth and final reason suggested in the text for the offense of the disciples and particularly of Judas.

It seems that they were offended by this incident because:

4. Because it directed them towards the essential scandal of the cross

I sometimes wonder how much of this was conscious and how much was unconscious. The text doesn't answer that it just shows Jesus making the connection. He says:

She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. (Mark 14:8 ESV)

Now – did she know that? Did she know that Jesus was going to be crucified – that he was going to die for our sins? If she did then she is the first one in the Bible to figure that out. See point 2.

Scholars debate this. I don't know. The text doesn't say but one thing we know is that every time Jesus speaks of his death – at least one of his disciples is offended. Of course the most famous example of that is when Peter actually tries to rebuke Jesus for speaking of the cross. Do you remember that? Jesus was teaching them that:

the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again... And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But ... he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mark 8:31–33 ESV)

Any mention of the cross offended the disciples.

That wasn't how it was supposed to go. The Messiah was supposed to be the King. He was supposed to defeat the Romans and establish the eternal Kingdom of God on the earth and THEY – the disciples – were supposed to be his princes and lieutenants. Jesus was messing with their religious fantasy.

And they were offended.

They didn't yet understand the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin and the necessity of salvation. They didn't know that they had to be SAVED before they could SERVE God in his Kingdom and they found that SUGGESTION remarkably offensive.

And so beginning with Judas, they began to fall away.

That is why this story is in your Bible.

What Is The Challenge In The Text?

Now the Apostle says in 2 Timothy 3:16 that:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in

righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16 ESV)

So from that we understand that the Scriptures are supposed to INFORM us but also to REFORM US. They are supposed to REBUKE US and CORRECT US and CHALLENGE US and so I want to end today by asking the question that I think we are supposed to ask. I think we are supposed to ask the question: what is the challenge in this text for us as Christians today?

I think the first one is really obvious; I think this text is challenging us:

1. To maintain a biblical sense of priority

Listen, if you gathered 100 Christians into a room, guaranteed, 25 of them would want to make charity and care of the poor our #1 priority as a church.

Guaranteed.

They would say: “Loving your neighbour is what it’s ALL about. That is the most important thing”.

But that’s not what Jesus said.

Jesus said the FIRST COMMANDMENT IS:

‘you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (Mark 12:30 ESV)

And the SECOND IS:

‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Mark 12:31 ESV)

That’s what Jesus said. First. And second.

But guaranteed – you get 100 Christians in a room and 25 will want to reverse that order.

Resist.

Insist on the priority of worship.

Insist that **THIS TIME COME FIRST** – first in the week and first in our collective **PRIORITY**. We **NEED THIS**. This is our highest dignity and privilege – this is **WHY WE DO MISSIONS** and this is why we do charity – Jesus said that:

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 ESV)

Do you see that? It's all about worship! We do good works **SO THAT** people will see that God is good and give him the glory and worship that he is due!

If you lose that – you lose it all.

If you lose that, you are the YMCA or the Boy Scouts of America. You are not identifiably or usefully Christian in any sense or understanding of the term. So let's be challenged by this text to maintain a proper sense of priority.

Secondly, let's be challenged to:

2. To restrain our inclination to impose our personality upon the worship of the church

These very reserved, very dignified, very proud Jewish men were determined to impose their personality as **THE STANDARD** of worship and religious decorum. They didn't want woman-y and weepy worship in the church – but Jesus told them to zip it.

“Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” (Mark 14:6 ESV)

Your personality and your preferences do not establish the parameters of appropriate worship.

It's hard for Christians to remember that – particularly Christian men. I grew up during the worship wars and started in ministry during the final days of the fighting. It was an embarrassing

season in the life of the church. Old white men spent far too much time attempting to standardize and doctrinalize their musical preferences. Listen, I like Handel as much as the next guy, but how do you decide that 18th century organ music is THE ONLY acceptable form of worship in the church? How do you get there?

And the reaction of younger people – men and women – was no more virtuous. The war was between two flavours of sin and nasty. One side said: ONLY ORGAN and the other side said NEVER ORGAN. Rebellion is no more attractive than intransigence. This should never have been as complicated as it was. We would never behave this way at home or with our family. If you drive to Florida as a family then everyone understands that there has to be some sharing and some accommodation to make the drive survivable. Grandma gets to choose a CD and then dad and then mom and then kids – this isn't rocket science this is basic human civility and the fact that it was lacking in the church for the better part of 20 years is an embarrassment and a scandal.

This text is challenging us to think about what really matters when we worship. And who really matters. Whose preferences and personality should be primary. If you think it's you - your preferences and your personality - then you have missed the boat and like Judas, you are in danger of being OFFENDED out of the Kingdom.

Be on guard.

And finally I think this text is challenging us:

3. To understand the difference between proximity and personal faith

Judas has been SO CLOSE this whole time – but obviously, never truly in. On the other hand this woman isn't even named in Mark's Gospel – and most scholars think that's why Mark doesn't name her despite that he knows we are likely going to guess. He's making a point and the point is that prominence and proximity do not indicate actual personal, saving faith. Judas was prominent. He was an officer of the church. He was the treasurer – John tells us that in his Gospel. He was the ultimate insider. And yet here we watch him fall away.

We don't actually know which of the Apostles wrote the letter to the Hebrews but I can't help but

think that this story stands behind what he said in Hebrews 6. Listen to what he says:

it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (Hebrews 6:4–6 ESV)

That almost has to be about Judas on some level doesn't it? He tasted. He sampled. He saw and then finally, he fell away. He held Jesus up to contempt. He didn't think Jesus worthy of this extravagant, emotional, excessive, immoderate WORSHIP. And in his offense – he fell away.

So close – but obviously and eternally outside.

That is the challenge of the text. The text is asking us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith.

Who are you in the story we have just seen? Are you Mary – anonymous, insignificant but sincere in your thanks and gratitude? Or are you Judas? Prominent, proximate and apostate?

That's a question you should ask because near means nothing.

This is an in or out kind of thing.

So come.

Come humbly, humanly and authentically. Come gratefully, joyfully and effusively. Come as you are – male or female – expressive or contemplative – bold or broken – come unto Jesus and be saved.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

