

A Shocking Gift

- Mark 14:1-11
- We are back in the Gospel of Mark, and we start the passion week with this text today. The word passion comes from the Latin word “passio” which means “to suffer.” And we know that Jesus’ suffering did not begin with the cross. James Edwards writes, “The general theme of chapter 14 is the abandonment of Jesus.” The chapter begins with Judas’ collusion with the Chief Priests to have Jesus arrested “by stealth” and put to death, and it ends with Peter’s three-time denial. But in the midst of this, we see another remarkable picture of what it means to be a disciple. Remember, Mark is writing to the Roman Christians to tell them about Jesus and to show them what it means to truly be a Christ-follower in a dangerous world. And again we see in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus’ highest praise goes to a woman. It was Christianity and it is still Christianity that elevates women to their rightful place, as image bearers of God in equal standing with men. (Church in Afghanistan, Mindy Belz says, is perhaps the fastest growing church in the world, although it only numbers around 2,000. But their faith will be greatly tested now with the Taliban taking control of the nation. They need our prayers.)
- In this story, Mark chooses not to name this woman, probably to accentuate the outsider vs insider theme, which we will talk about in the first point. But if it is the same story that John tells in his gospel, chapter 12, then this is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But Mark does not say her name, and again we see a Markan sandwich here. Remember those? Mark likes to bracket the primary theme, the meat, in between two contrasting pieces of bread. In this case, the story of an unnamed woman’s great love and sacrifice for Jesus is bracketed by the betrayal plot of an intimate insider. It is a warning to all who read it that closeness to Jesus does not guarantee faithfulness. Judas the insider knew Jesus better than anyone in the general population, and his position allows him access to Jesus that only 11 other men have, access that makes betrayal easier. The woman comes to give a shocking gift to Jesus, one that prepares him for his death, while Judas colludes with the enemies of the Lord in order to gain from Jesus’ death. Faith and treachery, love and enmity, compassion and contempt sit side by side in this text. Let’s look at this story today under these three points: Action, Reaction, and Commendation.
- **Action (verse 3)**
- It is Wednesday of Passion week. The location is Bethany, which is outside of Jerusalem. The host is Simon the leper, who would also be an outsider. He must be a former leper. Otherwise, he would not be able to host such a dinner party. Presumably he had been healed by Jesus and was now serving him dinner. That’s when an unnamed woman, adding to the outsider theme, enters the scene with her gift for the Lord. She breaks an alabaster flask of pure nard, which Mark tells us was “very costly.” We know from the reaction of some in the house that the ointment was worth more than 300 denarii. That means it was worth one year’s wages. Think about that in terms of your own salary. What would you have to do to give a gift to the Lord that would be worth one year’s wages? I would guess most of us don’t have

that amount just sitting in our checking. We talked two weeks ago about the grace of giving that the Bible calls us to “excel in,” and how the tithe was established as a baseline for giving to the “church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” (2 Tim. 3:15) This woman gave ten years of tithes, all at once. Now, since women at that time were mostly excluded from careers that allowed that kind of earning, and there were exceptions, it probably means that she did not buy that jar of pure nard, but it was a family heirloom. It was most likely a treasure that had been passed down, and therefore it did not just have monetary value but sentimental value as well. This was something you held onto as long as you could but if you had a rainy day, or in this case a rainy year, you could sell it and make it through the drought. Not this woman. And notice that she did not just pour out an ounce on Jesus’ head, though that would have been a great gift. She poured out all of it, every drop, as a sacrifice to the Lord. In fact, she smashed the jar itself. The vessel could never be used again. She gave it all to Jesus, this unnamed woman, and the act of sacrifice supersedes anything reported in the Gospels from the inner circle. The room was filled with the fragrance of her love for Christ. What Mark wants us to see is what discipleship looks like, what it means to love Christ, which is more important than anything else. We can choose to live our lives trying to make a name for ourselves, trying to be somebody that matters, trying to build our brand, if you will. But Jesus points us to this unnamed woman and says that her story will be told wherever the Gospel is preached. Jon Bloom writes, “How important to you is people’s approval? How important to you is faithfully obeying God? Sometimes we’re forced to sacrifice one in order to have or do the other.” As we will see, this woman did not gain a following on Instagram after this act. But she gained much more. So, what was the...

- **Reaction (verses 4-5)**

- They were indignant. Remember that? Last time we saw that, I think, was when the other disciples were indignant at James and John for requesting to sit on the right and left of Jesus in heaven. Not because they couldn’t believe that the Thunderboys would be so cheeky with that request. But because THEY didn’t think of it first! Here we see indignation out of what they said was a concern for the poor. They say this was a waste of resources, akin to what you might say to a child who poured the whole bottle of syrup on his pancakes, leaving none for you. You might say, 1- That was foolish and 2-That was selfish. That’s what the people said to each other, mumbling under their breath, and then they turned to her and scolded her. The word there can mean that they judged her, they murmured against her, or even that they flared their nostrils in anger! We know that right after this, Judas makes his decision to sell out Jesus, and it is possible that this woman’s action pushed him over the top. Because if there is one thing a pretender cannot stand, and in fact the whole world cannot stand, it is someone who is fully devoted to Jesus. That just rubs the pretenders and even the nominal believers the wrong way. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “Judas was one of those religious people who rarely see that their interest in Christ lies more in what he can do to further their goals than in what he wants to do to change their lives. (Judas), with others, could not tell the difference between grace and waste.” Let’s look finally at what Jesus did...

- **Commendation (verses 6-9)**

- We can all rejoice at what happens next. Jesus first stopped their mouths with his command to “Leave her alone.” He stood by her, and he stands by us, no matter the trial. I love this. Jesus is about to stand trial with no one standing with him, and he is about to be nailed to a cross and experience the wrath of his Father on behalf of all mankind, and yet he will not abandon this woman to her accusers.
- Jesus then questioned their motives. “Why do you trouble her?” Perhaps he looked at Judas at this point as if to say, “Is it really the poor you are concerned about?”
- Jesus then spoke the truth to her detractors. “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” And in verse 8, “She has done what she could.” Almost the same thing Jesus said about the poor widow in chapter 12. In each case, these women did what they were able to do, and Jesus commended both. The unnamed widow: “She...put in everything she had.” The unnamed woman: “She has done what she could.” The size of each gift made no difference to Jesus because he judged by motive, while all others were judging from appearance and by worldly standards. Edwards writes, “Faith and discipleship are not ideal realms, what we might like to be and do; they are absolute realities, who we are and what we are *able* to give.”
- Jesus then says that there will always be poor people you can minister to, “But you will not always have me.” (7b) Listen, Jesus did care about the poor, as evidenced by his ministry for three years, which was mostly to common people and the poor. But the fact that he commends this woman’s sacrifice for him instead of for the poor is another indication of the fact that Jesus was no mere mortal. “The value of a gift,” Edwards writes, “signals the value of the person to whom it is given. The extravagance of the woman shows that she alone understands Jesus’ incommensurable worth.”
- Jesus then reveals his understanding of what is coming in two days, and her understanding by faith that what she was doing for Jesus would be preparation for his burial. It seems that this woman is the only person in the room who understands that what Jesus came to do could only be accomplished through suffering.
- Finally, Jesus offers the highest commendation to this woman, saying that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, her story would also be told. It is the last time Jesus will mention the Gospel, and like the very first time, in chapter 1, the context is proclamation. Jesus came to die so that the Gospel could be proclaimed around the world and the Gospel cannot be proclaimed without the suffering of our Savior, on our behalf, being the centerpiece of it. This woman proclaimed the Gospel to a room full of people who either did not understand or who were enemies of Jesus and wanted to see him killed, and none of that mattered to her. What mattered to her was Jesus. You want to make a name for yourself. You can get to the top of that ladder of self-promotion and there realize your ladder was against the wrong wall. Instead, let’s spend our lives making his name look good, doing what we can do to that end. “She has done what she could,” Jesus said. We must do that as well. No amount of passion for Jesus will be too much. No amount of devotion to the Gospel will be too much. He is worth it.
- Prayer

- New members/Baby dedication
- Greet one another