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A Beautiful Deed in the Midst of Betrayal: Mark 14.3–9

SCOTT WOMBLE

While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." Mark 14.3–9 (NASB95)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus scolds hypocrites who do good deeds with wrong motives (Matt 6). Something about those familiar words comes to mind when reading about the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. For there in Mark 14.3–9, we read about an unnamed woman who performs a most beautiful deed done with the right heart attitude. It was a deed publically applauded by Christ that will be remembered as long as the gospel is preached (v. 9). Yet, while this story has indeed been told throughout the world since the time it occurred, a very interesting contrast in the context of the story is seldom emphasized. It's this contrast that brings the words of Jesus to the hypocrites to mind and, at the same time, makes the woman's act even more beautiful. It becomes a striking act of love and worship in the midst of a story of betrayal.

"Approximately ninety-one per cent (c. 601 out of 661 verses) of Mark reappears in Matthew or Luke."¹ Mark 14.3–9 is no exception. There is no doubt whatsoever that the same account appears in Matthew 26.6–13, as the two are virtually identical. After this, however, the questions surrounding this story are many.

Both Luke (Luke 7.36–50) and John (John 12.1–8) also have a version of an anointing. Due to differences in each, however, some have come to believe there may have been three separate anointings. And while it is not out of the question that all four Gospels tell of the same anointing,² today a prevalent thought is that there are two anointings: one in Galilee (Luke) and one in Bethany (Matthew, Mark, John).³

The Markan and Johannine versions are similar in several ways. Most noticeably, both name the location as Bethany. Both also portray those present as reclining at the table. In each of these versions, the perfume that the woman uses is described as very costly and made of pure nard. They are both parallel in that someone complains that the perfume could have been sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor. And finally, in each Jesus says, "Let the woman alone," and then makes the statement, "For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me."

1. Joel Green et al., eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 294.

2. Most problematic is understanding Mary (John's version) being referred to as a sinner (Luke's version).

3. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

But Mark and John also differ in four significant ways. The Markan version places the event at the home of Simon the leper, whereas in John the host is not mentioned. Mark concludes the story with Jesus mentioning the anointing for burial and that the woman's deed will long be remembered, while both of these features are absent in John. In Mark, the woman anoints Jesus' head, but in John it is his feet. The most important difference, however, is that John names the woman as Mary, the sister of Martha. John is the only author to provide a name for this woman.

Mark and Luke have few similarities: both mention reclining at the table, an alabaster vial of perfume and Simon as the host. The differences are greater: the locations differ (Bethany in Mark, Galilee in Luke), the identification of Simon is not the same (called "the leper" in Mark, called a Pharisee in Luke), and the anointing is described differently (head in Mark, feet in Luke). The most significant difference is that Luke refers to the woman as a "sinner." In keeping with this, Luke follows with a parable on forgiveness and Jesus then proceeds to teach Simon a lesson on that topic. Furthermore, the Lukan version ends with Jesus forgiving the sins of the woman, to which those in attendance wonder about this man who "even forgives sin." There is no mention of sin whatsoever in Mark's account.

While trying to reconcile the four Gospel stories is not easy, it is nevertheless important to any study of this passage. Still, since it is not the main point for this discussion, we'll move forward from here assuming that there were indeed two anointings. Our focus is on Mark and on his account we will focus.

Mark places the anointing in Bethany, which was the last stop on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.⁴ We're told that Simon "the leper" was the host of the dinner. It is highly doubtful that Simon had an active skin disease.⁵ Therefore, it is very plausible to think that Jesus had healed Simon of leprosy. Simon was also a very common name and so it is also not out of the realm of possibility that "the leper" could have been a nickname of sorts.

Jesus' presence made this a special occasion. As such, many of the details of the story are typical for that context. While they may have sat during normal meals, they often "reclined at the table" for feasts or banquets.⁶ "The action of anointing with oil after a journey" or in connection with a meal was customary.⁷ It was also conventional to anoint the head of an important guest.⁸ So, that act in itself is not out of the ordinary.

There are, however, two elements in the story which are a little more surprising. First, one may expect that a servant would have both washed the guest's feet and anointed the guest's head with oil.⁹ Since it is apparent that the latter was not done, it would appear that Simon was somewhat negligent as a host. But, of course, the most unexpected detail, and the point of controversy with those present, surrounds the fact that the woman used an entire vial of very costly perfume to anoint Jesus.

The reason she broke the vial is because the jar had a neck which was to be broken off when used, making the vial unusable for the future. As one can determine from reading the story, nard was a costly perfume (probably imported from India). Mark says the perfume was probably worth "over three hundred denarii."

To put this in perspective, this "very costly" perfume was worth about a year's wages. Before simply glossing over this, stop to consider what giving a gift equivalent to your annual salary would mean. Imagine

4. William L. Lane, "The Gospel of Mark," in *The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 394.

5. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. "Leprosy, as touched on in the Bible, probably also referred to human diseases such as psoriasis, lupas, ringworm and favus" (463).

6. Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 174.

7. Hugh Anderson, "The Gospel of Mark," in *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 306.

8. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 174.

9. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Moody Press: Chicago, 1987), 245.

the sacrifice this woman made! It was very possibly a family heirloom that had been passed down for generations.¹⁰ Furthermore, imagine the nest egg this provided for her family. This might be even more significant to a woman in a culture where women generally were not “independently wealthy.” To better understand its worth, Mark 6.33–44 reveals that 100 denarii would feed about 2,500 people, and that’s probably a low estimate since often women and children were not counted in such figures.

In response to the woman’s actions, “some were indignant.” They remarked that the perfume had been wasted and that it could have been sold and the “money given to the poor.” Mark does not reveal who the “some” were. Matthew, however, says it was some of the disciples. John ascribes the remarks to Judas alone.

While Judas may have stirred the pot, it’s not unlikely that someone else may have chimed in as well. Wessel maintains, “The mention of the poor is natural because it was the custom for the Jews to give gifts to the poor on the evening of the Passover.”¹¹

Mark says that the complainers actually “scolded” the woman. To this, Jesus intervenes and supports her. He made four comments in verses 6–9, one in each verse. He begins with an imperative by saying, “Let her alone,” and then adds that she has done a “good deed to me.” Both the ESV and the NIV have great renderings here when they say, “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” It was indeed a beautiful deed for the one who was about to give his very life for the sins of the world.

Jesus’ second comment seems somewhat perplexing on the surface. He says, “For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me” (an allusion to Deut 15.11).

The Bible is clear that God is a defender of the weak and is greatly concerned about those in need. Thus, Jesus is not saying that the poor can fend for themselves. He is drawing attention to the fact they can aid the poor anytime they like. There is no need to wait until special holidays to begin helping the needy. In fact, they can go help the needy tomorrow. But today, the Son of God is among them and this will not always be the case.

In the third of this series of comments, Jesus says that the woman anointed his body for burial. Ointments and perfumes were used to wash corpses (Acts 9.37).¹² Mark 16.1 tells of the women going to the tomb with spices so that they could anoint the body of Jesus. Because Jesus had risen from the dead, they were too late! So in a sense, this woman was the one who anointed Jesus’ body for burial.

The ensuing question is whether or not the woman was aware of this. We’ll never know for sure, but as Evans says, “anointing the head of one whom she and the disciples regarded as Israel’s Messiah would in all probability have been perceived in a messianic sense.”¹³ This may be true, but it’s apparent that the disciples (as seemed to be their custom) had difficulty in putting the pieces of the puzzle together. What we know is that, once again, Jesus told of his impending appointment with the cross.

Verse 9 reveals Jesus’ last comment surrounding this incident. He said, “Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.” Her beautiful deed was remembered, and yet her name was lost to history in the Markan account. It brings to mind the “poor widow” of Mark 12.41–44 who gave all she had. The deed was remembered, even if the name was not.

The story of the anointing has an intriguing context. Preceding the story we’re told the following: “Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, ‘Not during the festival, otherwise there

10. Lane, “The Gospel of Mark,” 492.

11. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 756.

12. Craig Evans and Stanley Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 174.

13. Craig A. Evans, “Mark,” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 360.

might be a riot of the people” (Mark 14.1–2). After the anointing, Mark tells us, “Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time” (Mark 14.10–11).

The chief priests and scribes could not “seize” Jesus, so Judas “betrayed” him! The festival was not a good time, but Judas would find “an opportune time.” One may wonder how the story of the anointing fits here. First and foremost, it’s a beautiful deed in the midst of betrayal! While the religious leaders, and even a disciple, did not recognize the beauty found in the Savior, this woman apparently did.

The irony is undeniable. The woman’s deed was so beautiful that it will always be spoken of as part of the events of Jesus’ final days before the cross. Yet, Judas’ deed was more memorable. One rarely ever sees a depiction of the passion of the Christ or the Easter story without the telling of Judas’ betrayal. It was a deed so horrendous that Jesus said, “It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Mark 14.21). The woman lovingly prepared him for burial, while Judas deviously prepared to have him killed.

Further contrasts are also evident. While Mark does not mention the woman by name, the Johannine version says the woman was Mary. Assuming the two stories refer to the same incident, there is a possible contrast at hand—a contrast between two disciples. Mary is the woman found at the feet of Jesus while he is teaching (Luke 10.39). This was the posture of a disciple and she took the lessons to heart. Yet, something was terribly wrong with the disciple named Judas. It’s difficult to comprehend how Judas failed so miserably after spending so much time with Jesus. It’s apparent that Mary received the word with gladness, yet Judas did not.

There is another striking “contrast of characters” with these two disciples in that the one whom everyone present would have given more credence to was Judas. His words and thoughts towards what the plan for the “expenses” should be would have been more valued. This would be based on cultural norms (the “place” of the woman versus the man) and on the “in group” versus the “out group.” Jesus, obviously, looked beyond these things and into the hearts and motives of the individuals.

And we must not miss the issue surrounding money, since it seems so directly connected with the motives and thinking at work in this passage. The woman was scolded by those who were indignant with her for wasting such a costly perfume because the money could have been used to help the poor. Yet, Judas sold Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver, probably a mere 120 denarii.¹⁴ In other words, the silver was only forty percent as valuable as the perfume. And while some were “indignant” (v. 4) toward the woman for using the entire vial of perfume to honor Jesus, the chief priests were “glad” (v. 11) at Judas’ promise to betray Jesus and deliver him over to them for a much lesser amount.

When considering Judas’ betrayal, there is one almost laughable feature present in this passage which bears mentioning. The chief priests and scribes wanted to “kill” (v. 1) Jesus. And, of course, Jesus had already prepared to lay his life down. This is why he referred to the anointing as preparation for his “burial” (v. 8). I say it is almost laughable because Jesus previously said, “I lay down My life for the sheep No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10.15b, 18a). And even after the betrayal in the garden, Jesus said that the Father could dispense twelve legions of angels to his side (Matt 26.53). One thing is clear, coming in “stealth” to seize Jesus at “an opportune time” would not have helped unless Jesus had allowed such wicked activity to succeed.

The previously stated reference from John 10 is important. Jesus did not lay down his life without purpose. He laid it down because he had full “authority to take it up again.” All pointers to the cross

14. Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, 176, says the silver coins were probably tetradrachms. He explains that a “drachm was the equivalent of a denarius” and that four drachms equaled one tetradrachm. Therefore, the coins were probably worth 120 denarii.

eventually lead to the empty tomb! Thus, ultimately, the anointing leads there as well; it foreshadows a victorious Savior. This makes the woman's deed even more beautiful and relevant to the whole story of Christ's work on earth.

Still, this woman's deed was destined to create criticism in her time. One can only imagine what her family and close friends may have said to her. They probably echoed the words, "What a waste." But the woman did not allow any possible fears or the scrutiny of others to paralyze her. She followed her heart and headed towards the Savior. She gave a gift that few of us would dare imagine. And in case one is curious as to the wealth of the woman, it really seems irrelevant because Jesus recognized this as a good deed. There is no reason to consider that she held back anything that God needed of her because Jesus said that "she did what she could." That is the mark of a true disciple, one who hears and obeys the voice of the master. This was no arbitrary deed that went unnoticed by heaven. It was a most beautiful deed in the midst of betrayal. When we do our acts of worship towards Christ with pure motives, we do honor him greatly in the midst of a world that does not, and we contribute to the preaching of the gospel!

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