

The Woman with an Alabaster Jar

John 12:1-8 New American Standard Bible (NASB) [See also, Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9. Cf. Luke 7:36-39]

Mary Anoints Jesus

*12 Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. ³ Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, *said, ⁵ “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” ⁶ Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. ⁷ Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. ⁸ For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.”*

Introduction

Today's story, the woman with an alabaster jar, is recorded in all four Gospels. Each Gospel has a slightly different account in detail (E.g. Matthew and Mark--Jesus' head was anointed. Luke and John--Jesus' feet were anointed). However, the common denominator is that a woman anointed Jesus with perfume and that was called a waste by the spectators.

I have chosen John's account for today's sermon, because it identifies the name of the woman, Mary. Let's pretend that you and I are in the same room as Jesus. We are watching three parties: Jesus, Mary, and the rest of the men (12 disciples and Lazarus). Mary presented Jesus with her gift. Jesus was pleased with her offering. Yet, some disciples were displeased with her action calling such a gift to Jesus a waste.

Let's check it out.

Content

A week before Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus was visiting in a town called Bethany. He was the guest of honor in Lazarus's house. Who was Lazarus? He was the dead man walking! (John 11). He had been dead for four days before Jesus raised him from the dead. So, in appreciation of what Jesus had done for the family, dinner was served for Jesus and His disciples. During the dinner, a woman named Mary (it is unclear who she was, but it could've been Lazarus's sister) came into the room, broke an alabaster jar of pure nard (very costly perfume), anointed Jesus' feet with it, loosened her hair, and wiped His feet with her hair. The fragrance of the perfume filled the entire house right away. Her action was a

public demonstration of her devotion and love for the Lord. It was an act of worship and adoration.

Not so much to the disciples, though. Their reaction was “To what purpose is this waste made?” “Why this waste?” or “What did she make this waste for?” (literal: why has this waste of perfume taken place?—Mark 14:4). *This good perfume was totally wasted!*

If I were a director making a movie out of today’s text, I would have the camera zoomed in on the disciples’ faces. Shock. Disbelief. Disgust. Disapproval. Rebuke. All together.

Finally, one of the disciples spoke up his mind. It was Judas, the one who sold his master for 30 silver coins. He said, “This perfume should’ve been sold over 300 denarii and given to the poor!” Denarius was a day wage for a laborer: to feed 5,000 people required over 200 denarii (John 6:7). So, 300 denarii could feed 7,500 people times \$5/person=**\$37,500 in today’s value**).

Jesus said to His disciples, “Leave her alone. Don’t shame her. She did a right thing for me. She prepared my burial ahead of time.”

Here are three lessons for us.

Once given to the Lord, everything becomes sacred, and nothing is a waste. Once we present the Lord with our gifts, whatever form they may be (time, talent, or treasures), our gifts become sacred, therefore, they are never a waste. Remember: it is the Lord, not the world, who determines the worth of our gift.

Let’s think about our Sunday morning worship time. Time is the most precious commodity we have. When we worship the Lord, He is pleased with us. As He accepts our worship, the Lord declares our worship sacred, therefore, no one should call it a waste. E.g. I would leave him unnamed, but one of the richest people in the world once said that going to church on Sunday morning is a waste of time. I totally disagree with him. So does God. So does Jesus. So does the Holy Spirit. So does the Bible. Sunday morning services are sacred and never a waste.

As a matter of fact, any time you spend with Jesus and any service you offer to the Lord, they are sacred and never a waste. Don’t listen to what the world says about your gift to the Lord. Listen only to the Lord. E.g. In my senior year in high school, one of my classmates made fun of me. He knew that I would spend 30 minutes daily in God’s Word. He said, he would rather use that time for studying one more subject. In other words, he called my time with the Lord a waste. In a couple of months, the Lord proved him wrong by rewarding me with a miracle in college entrance exam. Once given to the Lord, everything becomes sacred, and nothing is a waste.

Our love and devotion to the Lord determine our gifts to Him. The more we love Jesus, the better gift we want to give Him. Vice versa.

Consider Mary here. She gave her best gift to the Lord. Why? Because she loved Jesus. The disciples were displeased with her action, though, saying, *it is too much, you're insane, or it is a total waste.* Your attitude toward gifts to the Lord gives away how much you love Jesus.

Consider the disciples' heart: It goes something like this: *Of course, we too want to present Jesus with offering! Something nice, but not 300 denarii! Not that expensive! Something cheaper would do it! Even Christ doesn't deserve that much! The poor people do!*

I don't think they would've raised their eyebrows if she had given Jesus a cheap perfume. Mary, however, would've have never done that, because it would've been an insult to the Lord. Instead, she gave Him the most treasured item in her possession (in those days unmarried women often kept the perfume for their wedding). What made her do that? Once again, it was her love for Jesus! From the bottom of her heart. To her, Jesus deserved nothing but the best! Therefore, she would give Him the best that she owned!

The lesson for us is this: Love dictates our priority and gift. E.g. The poor widow (Luke 21:1-4). Jesus says, "she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on" (Luke 21:4). She put all she had into the treasury. We would say: she shouldn't have done that, because she couldn't afford to give her entire living expenses. Why did she do so, then? Because she loved the Lord and His kingdom. I don't think the Lord would let her starve to death afterward.

Love the Lord and offer Him the best!

The Lord first, neighbor next. Christ first, the poor next. Worship first, charity next.

In today's church, we put a high emphasis on missions. We are engaged in many mission projects to help the needy both domestic and abroad. It is a good thing. We need to continue doing so. However, we ought not to forget priorities in the order of things we do: the Lord first, neighbor next. Christ first, the poor next. Worship first, charity next. E.g. One man came to Jesus one day asking what the greatest commandment of all is: ³⁶*"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"* ³⁷*And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'* ³⁸*This is the great and foremost commandment.* ³⁹*The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'* ⁴⁰*On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets"* (Matthew 22:36-40). In that order, not the other way around. If we become mixed in our spiritual priorities, Christ's church will cease to be different from secular charities.

What is the difference between the Christian Church and the secular charity organizations such as United Ways? They both serve people and worthy causes all around

the world. Helping the poor. Help the homeless, and so forth. It is the worship that distinguishes us from good works only. Don't get me wrong. Jesus calls us to do good (Matthew 5:16). However, for us, to know Christ and make Him known takes the front seat (Matthew 28:19-20). Worship and serve the Lord come before serving others.

Hear one more time what Judas said: why wasn't this perfume sold and given to the poor? Focusing on charity works, he totally forgot about the worship part. Mary's offering was given to the Lord. In our walk with God, obeying God's commands such as forgive, love, be thankful, and pray must precede our charity works. Charity works without worship is secular and must be avoided among God's people.

Conclusion

Love dictated Mary's offering to Jesus! The 300-denarius perfume wasn't enough to the Lord. She would have given 3,000 denarii to Jesus at her heartbeat if she had. Offer your best to the Lord, and the Lord will be well pleased. Know that your offering is never a waste. Amen.