

Mary Helped Prepare Jesus to be Our Passover

Mark 14:1–11
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Christmas day is now twenty-nine days away. I trust everyone's getting ready for it. Today's text is not about Christmas per se, but it helps us understand Christmas. It explains why Jesus came into the world.

It begins with a fascinating transition! Things had been going somewhat smoothly for a few days before our text. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, announcing his victory. He preached and taught openly, denouncing the scribes and Pharisees and foretelling the soon destruction of Jerusalem. Although opposition from Jewish leaders intensified, Jesus had no trouble exposing their silliness.

But all of this changed with today's text. Verse 1 says, *After two days was the feast of the passover, and of unleavened bread.* The Jews were about to observe one of their most sacred feasts to commemorate the deliverance of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. This was a solemn time. Their minds were focused on redemption and filled with joy, as they eagerly looked forward to the coming of the Redeemer, who would bruise Satan's head and set them free. That time had come. Jesus was there to offer himself on the cross as a Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

The Conspiracy

Mark told us how this would happen. The rest of verse 1 says, *And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take him by craft, and put him to death.* Of course, there wasn't anything new about the desire of the priests and scribes to kill Jesus. Jesus had already announced that they would do this three times (chs. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). And just two chapters before today's text, after he taught the Parable of the Vineyard, in which the vine dressers sought to kill the landowner's son, Mark wrote, *And they sought to lay hold on him, but feared the people: for they knew that he had spoken the parable against them: and they left him, and went their way* (ch. 12:12).

Verse 1 is even more specific, though. It doesn't just say that the Jewish officials wanted to kill Jesus, but that they wanted to do it secretly and deceitfully. Mark wrote, *By craft.* They had to come up with a plan that would conceal their hatred and animosity toward the Son of God.

However, these officials also knew that they couldn't carry out their evil plan during the passover or the days following. Verse 2 says, *But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar of the people.* But why? It was because the headcount in Jerusalem was probably ten times normal, with Jews coming to Jerusalem from all over the world to observe the feast. Most of these people were unfamiliar with the daily scheming of the priests and wouldn't have allowed the holy day to be spoiled by it. The Galilean Jews were particularly excitable and capable of violence.

Now, look at how Mark recorded the conspiracy against Jesus. He began in verses 1 through 2, as we just said. Then, with no transition at all, he jumped in verse 3 to a different scene in Bethany. And in verse 10, he came back to the conspiracy. So, we have conspiracy, then Bethany, then conspiracy. Why did Mark sandwich these events together like this? One reason was to show that God's purpose was greater than man's. We'll come back to this in a few minutes.

For now, let's jump ahead to the second part of the conspiracy in verses 10 and 11. Here we learn about Judas' involvement in it. These two verses tell us a lot about this man. His name literally means 'Judas, a man of Kerioth.' Kerioth was a small town in Judea. Thus, Judas was the only apostle of Jesus Christ whose family had settled in the south. He should have been the first person to protect Jesus, but he did the opposite. Mark also identified Judas as *one of the twelve*, i.e., one who had traveled with Jesus, saw Jesus' miracles and heard his teaching. Being a member of this small band, he not only betrayed the Lord, but everyone else as well. Next, Mark said that Judas *went unto the chief priests, to betray [Jesus] unto them.* Note that the priests and scribes hadn't come to him. He knew they wanted to kill Jesus because Jesus told him, and he sought them, thus exposing the enormity of his hatred against the Lord. And, as if this weren't enough, the end of verse 11 says that Judas insisted on betraying Jesus *conveniently*, i.e., in a way that worked for him.

Judas betrayed Jesus because he was greedy. In John's account of the woman anointing Jesus, we learn that he was the one who complained that the ointment hadn't been sold to help the poor. John wrote, *This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein* (John 12:6). Judas served as treasurer for the apostles and, no doubt, wanted to get his hands on some of the money. And verse 11 of our text in Mark reported that the Jews paid him to betray Jesus. They gave him thirty pieces of silver, an extremely low price for a man's life.

Judas' betrayal was especially egregious because he had pretended to be Jesus' friend for three years. Psalm 55:13–14 foretold what kind of man he would be. The psalmist wrote, *But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.* All men think God is their friend, and apart from God's grace we would all be just as traitorous and have just as miserable an end.

And let's remember that all of Jesus' apostles betrayed him when he was arrested. The difference is that Judas alone did so intentionally and with malice. The others fled because they were afraid.

The Anointing

In between the two parts of this conspiracy, something else took place. While Jesus was dining with Simon the leper — apparently someone he healed of leprosy — a woman came in with an alabaster box of ointment and anointed him.

This incident sounds like the one we considered two weeks ago in the seventh chapter of Luke, but they're not the same. In Luke, the woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Here, the woman anointed Jesus' head with ointment, which ran down to his feet. Also, the woman in Luke went to Jesus to express her gratitude for his love and mercy. But the woman in today's text anointed Jesus' entire body to prepare for his burial. Jesus said, *She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying*. And unlike the incident in Luke, we know exactly who the woman in today's text was — not a notorious sinner, but Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She's the same woman who sat at Jesus' feet, clinging to every word that came out of his mouth, while her sister busied herself with much serving (Luke 10:38–42). We know Mary was the woman in today's text because John said so. Martha served the supper at Simon's house and Mary brought the ointment (John 12:2–3).

So, what exactly did Mary do? She broke the neck of the flask containing the ointment and poured it on Jesus' head. Verse 3 says that this ointment was *very precious*, i.e., extremely expensive. In the first century, a small vial of it cost three hundred denarii, i.e., an average worker's annual pay. For the woman in Luke 7, who brought the same ointment, this was probably everything she had — her lifetime savings. But not so with Mary. Most commentators believe her ointment was an heirloom — something that may have been passed down from generation to generation. But she kept it for a different purpose. John 12:7 says that she had saved it for that day, i.e., to anoint Jesus. John wrote, *Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this*. So, she bathed Jesus in it.

Mary's anointing of Jesus was such an extravagance that it caused the disciples to murmur against her. They were red hot with indignation. They said within themselves, *Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor. And they murmured against her*.

We have to be careful here not to suppose that Jesus expects every believer to bring extravagant gifts like Mary's. That's not the point. Mary did it because it was her part in the Lord's ministry.

And Jesus commended her for it. He said in verse 6 that she had done a good work for him. Earlier, he said that she had done a good work when she learned at his feet instead of helping her sister prepare dinner. He said, *But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her* (Luke 10:42). We get the sense that Mary was a woman who overflowed with good deeds. Another woman of the same kind was Dorcas in Acts 9. Concerning her, Luke said, *This woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did* (v. 36). It's no wonder that the people of her town sent two men to fetch Peter to heal her after she died.

Ministering to the poor is unquestionably a good work. In the Old Testament, God made special provisions for the poor. And in the New Testament, James defined true and undefiled religion before God as caring for widows and orphans. So, selling the ointment that cost a year's salary would have done a lot of good for a lot of people. Judas wanted to do this because he wanted the cash for himself. But if Mary was full of good works, wouldn't she also have known how much the sale of her ointment would have helped the poor? Wouldn't she gladly have given it already? Yet, she didn't. Why? Because the Lord laid it on her heart to use her expensive ointment for a much greater good, viz., anointing Jesus' body for burial. When Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea didn't have time to prepare his body for burial. According to the gospels, he wrapped him in a clean linen cloth, bypassing the customs of the day. He used only a mixture of myrrh and aloes supplied by Nicodemus. Mary's ointment filled the gap.

Sometimes we have to choose between good things. We have to decide which is best at the moment. After all, our resources are limited. We can't do everything.

But consider what Mary actually did. When Jesus gave his disciples the Lord's Supper in the upper room only hours later, he was drenched in her perfume. When the mob came to arrest him afterward, the scent was still overpowering. Caiaphas and Herod and Pontius Pilate couldn't help noticing it. Nor could the soldiers as they beat him and nailed him to the cross. Everywhere Jesus went and in everything he did, the smell of Mary's ointment radiated from his body. His Father used this to reveal the good that Jesus did for sinners — dying on the cross in our place so that we no longer have to suffer under God's righteous judgment. Nothing smelled as good. Mary's appointment was also a testimony to the power of God, who brought good out of death by raising his Son from the grave.

By covering Jesus with expensive perfume, Mary announced what was really going on. The priests and scribes had conspired against Jesus. Judas was eager to help because he wanted money.

But Mary showed what was really going on. God's passover Lamb was about to go to the cross to fulfill his promise of life and salvation. She anointed Jesus as an act of worship, celebrating the salvation of everyone who believes. Calvin wrote, "Mary was led by a secret movement of the Spirit to anoint Christ."

This being so, it's no wonder that Jesus commended her even more in verse 9: *Verily I say unto you, Whosoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.* Even now, we still read and learn from her.

Jesus offered himself on the cross for us without reservation. Mary anointed Jesus with expensive ointment to announce that the promised Savior had come.

The gospel requires us to sacrifice everything we are and everything that we have to Jesus. We don't give him expensive gifts. We give ourselves. Paul wrote, *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service* (Rom. 12:1).

Is our devotion to Jesus Christ adequate? Do we give the Lord everything we have? Do our lives proclaim his finished work on our behalf? Do we love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength? Is this where we are?

This should be where we are because Jesus is our passover. Paul wrote, *Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (1 Cor. 5:7–8). Amen.