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Mark / Mark 14:1-11

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# Prayer of Illumination

*Lord, you know what distracted hearts we have, O give us self-recollection; you know what hard, dead hearts we have, O touch and awaken us! You know how we yet resist your Word and our lower nature is reluctant to bow to your scepter; therefore, O Lord, show forth your power; send your Spirit on high to work among us, to make our hearts submissive, and ourselves capable of living in true union with you, our salvation, and of yielding totally to your grace. Amen. - Gerhard Tersteegen*

## Text: Mark 14:1-11

## Introduction

Our text today structured like a sandwich. We are told in verses 1-2 about a conspiracy to kill Jesus among the chief priests and scribes. Then in verses 10-11, we are told about Judas's part in this conspiracy. The conspiracy to kill Jesus is split by the account of the woman who anoints Jesus for His burial in verses 3-9.

We see zeal in two directions. Hate and love both motivate action. The scribes and chief priests and — by this point Judas — hate Jesus. That hatred has bubbled over into conspiracy to murder. Love also motivates action. The woman in verses 3-9 evidently has had her whole life transformed by the love of Christ to such an extent that she pours out a year's wages in a singular act of devotion and worship.

# Explanation of The Text

## The Conspiracy Part A

We have been getting nearer and nearer to the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus and His disciples observed the Passover meal on the night when He was betrayed, and **verse 1** tells us these events take place two days before that. The chief priests and scribes, that is the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, *were seeking how to arrest Him by stealth and kill Him*. This sort of conspiracy has been bubbling away under the surface since Mark 3:6, when *“6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.”*

This conspiracy has elevated to the point where it has become policy. It is the official plan of action of the ruling class. The grammar indicates that they were seeking in an ongoing way. It had become an obsession. It reminds us

of Psalm 2:

*“1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.*

As we will see, they succeed in their plan, but fail in their ultimate goal. They are raging against God’s anointed and will see Him put to death, yet God laughs and scoffs at the men who try and outsmart God. The ones who are eager to observe Passover — that celebration of liberation from Egypt — have become Pharaoh. The baptism of Israel at the dead sea became death to the enemies of God and His people. The upcoming baptism of Jesus through His death becomes death to the enemies of God and His people.

And these men were cowards. They sought to do this by stealth, because, as **verse 2** tells us, they were afraid of the likely popular uprising that would result from the large numbers of people loyal to Jesus. They were afraid of the Romans then coming in to crush a revolt. All of which would cost the Sanhedrin their power. These people are pragmatists. They do whatever is most expedient to achieve their own selfish ends.

## An Extravagant Act

Then we come to the next section. Remember that Mark is intentionally contrasting the Sanhedrin, and later, Judas, with what happens in verses 3-9.

First of all, we note in **verse 3** that Jesus is no longer in Jerusalem. He's left the Temple, He's pronounced judgement from the Mount of Olives, and now He is in Bethany, located on the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem. It was in Bethany that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and we are told that Jesus is in the house of Simon the leper. John's gospel tells us that the unnamed woman in Mark 14 is in fact Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and of Martha. Perhaps Simon the leper was their father. Perhaps he was some other homeowner in Bethany who had been healed by Jesus and had organised a get together of others who had been powerfully rescued by Jesus.

It's important for us, however, to shelve for a moment the fact we know this is Mary. Mark leaves her name out of his account on purpose. And here's one reason why. Jesus has left the centre of where true worship should take place: the temple in Jerusalem; He has left the location and people who should be clean. And He is come *outside* the city, to a *leper's* house, and is associating with *nameless* people, of no reputation.

Whereas idolatry has corrupted those on the inside, Jesus finds faithful worship on the outside. We have just seen this with the scribes and the widow in chapter 12. We have just seen this in the judgement pronounced on

Jerusalem and the promise that the gospel will go to the nations in chapter 13. We will see this most acutely with Judas — one of the Twelve — in a few minutes.

**Verse 3** tells us this unnamed woman interrupts the dinner. In this culture, it was a huge faux pas for a woman to interrupt dinner unless she was serving food. Here, she interrupts dinner, not to serve dinner, but to pour a flask of pure nard over Jesus' head. Jesus again overlooks external tradition for true faithfulness. Nard was a kind of ointment that came from overseas. It was incredibly expensive — **verse 5** tells us it cost three hundred denarii, which was about a year's wage for a blue-collar worker. It was likely an heirloom, passed down in the family because women were usually unable to work in such a way that would allow them to earn such a sum. It was preserved in a jar, and the only way to access it was to break the jar. It was a one-time deal. Once it was open, you had to use it. This woman gives an irrevocable gift to the One whose gift and calling are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

In **verse 4** we see that some — John tells us Judas was certainly involved — who were indignant. They saw this as a huge waste, and in **verse 5** the virtue signalling happens. It could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor! They scolded her. The Greek implies real anger in their reaction. Mark doesn't identify the real reason behind the objection, but John does. John tells us that Judas loved money. There was no real motivation to

help the poor in Judas. However, there were others there who were indignant. Perhaps they did care about the poor. But once again, the disciples are getting in the way of discipleship, just like they had with the children in Mark 10.

**Verse 6** gives Jesus' response. He doesn't rebuke them for having a love of money. Instead He rebukes them because she has done a beautiful thing to Him. She has given an extravagant gift, a beautiful gift, and Jesus receives it with gratitude. As James Edwards says, "*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.*"^ Whatever you do, don't get *too* serious about following Jesus. Whatever you do, don't become a *fundamentalist*. Whatever you do, don't become *radicalised*. Well, I think we should redeem a few of those phrases. To be a fundamentalist means to build your life on fundamentals and to be uncompromising on those convictions. To be radical means to be all out for Jesus. I remember when I was growing up it wasn't unusual to be called to live a life of *radical* faith. Now, believers are led to believe that real faith is a moderate faith. It's not true. Real faith will do anything for Christ.

Just as the widow gave a little, but Jesus received it; here the nameless woman in Simon the leper's house gives a lot, and Jesus received it. If you give two copper coins in faith, it's not worthless; if you give a year's salary, it is not

wasted.

In **verse 7** Jesus teaches us about the way the world works. The world is complex. There will always be poor people. He says you can do good for them. It sounds a bit like when He challenged the Pharisees around tithing. They tithed on their spice rack (which He says they ought to have done), but failed to observe the weightier matters of the law. Here, Jesus says there is a weightier matter to attend to. They will not always have Him. Jesus affirms that it is good to do good for the poor, without falling for the fallacy that it's a choice between doing good to the poor and being generous to the Lord.

Life is not a zero-sum game. What that means is that God's world is a river, not a pie. If God's world is a pie then the more one person has, the less other people get. But God's world doesn't work like that. History shows us that the more people who are born, the wealthier the world gets. God's world is a world in which you can do both/and. It's a river — abundance and resource keep flowing to and through the generous. Proverbs 11:24 *“24 One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.”*

Practically speaking, Jesus's point is that He won't always be with them. In other words, there will be countless opportunities to give to the poor, but limited time to do beautiful things for the Lord.

But ultimately, there is something else going on here. In a

sense, *Jesus* is the ultimate poor man. No one gave up wealth like He did; no one sacrificed as much as He did; no one gave away as much as He did. He had no place to lay His head. He was rejected by His own people. This woman *is* giving to the poor.

And Jesus shows us here that He takes priority over all other good causes and pursuits. You can give to the poor as much as you want, but until you give your life to Christ, you are lost.

**Verse 8** tells us that although the woman had one thing in mind, God was ordaining a deeper significance to her actions. Nard was usually used for perfuming and beautifying. Song of Solomon 1:12, “*12 While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.*” Here though, Jesus tells the disciples that she has anointed Him for His burial. Knowing the kind of death He was to die — on a tree, cursed, a criminal’s death — someone like that would have had their body thrown to the dogs after death, or at best, buried in a mass grave. No burial rites. But here, He receives the burial anointing a King would have received. Later, Joseph of Arimathea would ensure He gets a tomb fit for a king.

Here again we note the dullness of the insiders: the disciples who have heard Jesus predict His own death three times (Mark 8, 9, 10) have done nothing about that, but the outsider, this unnamed woman, in the providence of God, has prepared His body for burial.



To close out this middle section, **verse 9** says. *“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.”*

And here we have it. In our bibles. In fact, we can see that by pouring out the nard on Jesus, a year’s wages of nard, she has in fact done more for the poor than most others in history. Because she has shown us in this act of beautiful, over-the-top, sacrificial generosity, what a life changed by Jesus looks like. She has shown sinners throughout history, the inestimable worth of Jesus. What she has done will be told in memory of her because what she has done is a picture of a saved sinner. She has shown us that Christ’s love is priceless — worth more than anything we have in this life. And He gives it freely. Just like she broke open the jar of nard over Jesus, God broke the body of His Son on the cross for sinners.

In fact, Jesus here subtly reveals that His death is part of the good news. **Being anointed for burial implies His death, and His death will lead to the gospel being proclaimed in the whole world.** This is what the disciples haven’t understood. They had no concept of a dying Messiah, a dying Christ. They expected a new David, sure someone who would be persecuted, but someone who would sit on David’s throne – in Jerusalem, having crushed the enemies of Israel. Not someone who would be killed as a criminal outside the city walls. Not someone who would pronounce the destruction of Israel! They don’t get it. Maybe Mary did. Judas certainly didn’t get it –

perhaps this is why he betrayed Christ. His political/military fervour to see Rome removed was about to be disappointed by this Jesus who constantly undermined his own revolutionary activity! Jesus reveals here that His death *and* His burial is part of the gospel, the good news.

## The Conspiracy Part B

Then, in **verses 10-11** we return to the conspiracy of verses 1-2. Only now Judas takes action. Remember the contrast — the wonderful faithfulness of the woman and the incredible betrayal of Judas. Both people made a sacrifice of faith. The woman in the best possible sense — sacrificing *because she had faith*; Judas in the worst possible sense — sacrificing his faith.

All this is the last straw for Judas. He realises he's not going to get things his own way following this Jesus. Confronted with this 'waste' in his eyes, which is really spirit and truth worship, Judas — and we are reminded that he is an insider, one of the twelve (verse 10) — initiates a scheme. He is the one who goes to the chief priests to betray Jesus. Judas was what they needed to catch Jesus when it was quiet. Judas would help them do this by stealth.

**Verse 11** tells us that Judas, being a lover of money, gets what he wants. A tragic statement — the chief priests were *glad* to give him money for the betrayal. Twice, once in verse 10 and here in verse 11 we are told that Judas will

betray Jesus. The same Greek verb is used by Jesus twice when He says He will be delivered up, in Mark 9:31 and Mark 10:33. A trusted friend has become an enemy of Christ. But we must remember that Judas is a moral agent here. He does this voluntarily, before Satan enters him. Yet God has sovereignly ordained this to happen. God, in His grace and wisdom, uses even great human evil to bring about salvation for His people.

## Conclusion and Application

So as we consider the implications for our lives, we need to understand that there are two sacrifices going on here. There is a sacrifice of faith from the woman, and there is a sacrifice of faith from Judas. But they each sacrifice in very different ways. The woman sacrifices great wealth because of her faith in Christ. Judas sacrifices his faith in Christ because he desired great wealth.

The insider — the one who had regular access to Jesus — was the one who betrayed Jesus. The outsider — the nameless woman, outside of Jerusalem, inhabiting a former-leper's home — was the one whom God ordained should anoint Jesus for His burial.

God, throughout history chooses to use people no one else would use. He calls Abram who originally served other gods. He chooses younger brothers Jacob, Joseph, David. He uses people like Esther and Ruth and Rahab to bring about great good for His people. Here He uses a

nameless woman to remind us that faithful worship is what God most desires.

We are reminded to never try to use God to get what you want. He will not be your means to an end. Likely, Judas was following Jesus for what he could get. He evidently made himself some money by dipping into the moneybags. He was also likely motivated by ideas of political revolution, and when he realised it wasn't going to go that way, he was quick to abandon his Master. Will we be like that? Will we be disciples who abandon Jesus when life takes a turn for the worse? Will we be disciples who sacrifice our faith on the altar of comfort or worldly recognition or wealth? Or will we be like the woman in Simon's house who is willing to give everything to follow Christ?

We are reminded then to stop being moderate in our religion. We are reminded that extravagant, over-the-top, seemingly wasteful devotion, is the fruit of a changed life. This text could be used to talk about our giving. That would be fine. But just take a step back a minute. Before we talk about money, what about how we spend our time? I could never read more than a few verses of the Bible a day. Why not? I could never make the sacrifice to give my kids a Christian education. Why not? I could never tell a friend about Jesus. Why not? I could never give of my time to serve others. Why not? I'm not saying for one minute you have to do these things in order to be a Christian. I *am* saying that a Christian, someone whose life

has been radically transformed by grace; someone who was dead and is now alive; someone who was destined for hell, but it now ordained for everlasting life — that kind of person is going to start revving the engine on these sorts of things.

We are reminded by this text that devotion to Christ *costs*. But it is a cost worth paying. It isn't a price of admission. Getting in is a gift of grace. But it is the cost of discipleship. Real faith will be accompanied by real works. Romans 12:1 tells us that we are *living sacrifices*. Do you know what that means? We are walking around *dead*. It is not I who live but Christ in me.

So, which sacrifice will you make? Will you sacrifice your faith, like Judas? Or will you sacrifice for your faith, like this woman? We know from John's gospel that this woman is Mary. She had seen Jesus raise her brother back to life. No wonder she gave so extravagantly. May we, who ourselves have been raised back to life, go and do likewise.

Let's pray.

## Footnotes

<sup>^</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 414–415.