

Mark 12:1-11

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[0 : 00] Have you ever done a beautiful thing to Jesus? Have you ever done a beautiful thing for Jesus? Again, I give you a moment to think what might that be.

What might you have done that could be described in that way? Or what Jesus himself would be willing to categorize or describe in that way?

As we have been studying Mark's gospel at the Neighborhood Fellowships, one expression of Jesus particularly struck me. And it is his own testimony concerning Mary, as it's found in the passage that we've read in Mark chapter 14.

That in Mary's anointing of Jesus, she had done a beautiful thing to him. And this evening I want us to consider this incident and to do so from one particular perspective.

The passage that we've read in Mark's gospel and all the more so as we draw in the information that we have in John's gospel and also in Matthew's gospel.

[1 : 17] There is much that could be said. But this evening our purpose or our goal is a modest one in the sense that we don't want to draw everything that there is to be drawn.

But to fix our attention on this one perspective. And it is this. And as we look at the passage there in Mark chapter 14, we find that Jesus says three very particular things about Mary, or more accurately, about what Mary has done.

The first one I've already referred to. There in verse 6, he is rebuking those who have objected to what Mary has done, the disciples.

And then he says, she has done a beautiful thing to me. That's the first thing that Jesus himself says concerning what Mary had done.

She has done a beautiful thing to me. The second thing that Jesus says concerning what Mary had done we find in verse 8.

[2 : 32] There we read at the beginning of the verse, she did what she could. It's the second thing that Jesus says concerning Mary's action.

She has done a beautiful thing to me. She did what she could. And then we have a third affirmation, a third opinion given by Jesus concerning Mary's action.

There in verse 8. Immediately following the second one. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

Now, before we think of each of these in turn, let's just briefly set the scene.

All four Gospels give an account of an anointing by a woman of Jesus. But it's generally recognized that Luke's account is different in so many respects to the others that it is describing, or Luke is describing, a separate occasion.

[3 : 53] However, the accounts that we have in Mark, in Matthew, and in John, I think it's generally recognized or considered, are referring to the selfsame occasion or incident.

And if we accept that to be so, which I think is reasonable to do, then as we draw from the other Gospels, we can supplement what we have here before us in Mark's Gospel, where we'll be concentrating our attention.

For example, something very important that John provides for us, that Mark chooses not to do so, is who this woman is, which is important, I would have thought, though Mark obviously had his reasons for not identifying her.

But John tells us that it was Mary, Mary the sister of Lazarus. And certainly we will say all that we say this evening, taking that as the case, and that Mark also is speaking about Mary.

Also, the incident that we've read about and we'll be thinking about, according to John, took place six days before the Passover, and the day before the triumphal entry.

[5 : 06] Very much in the final days before the death of Jesus. The unanimous testimony of all three Gospels is that the incident took place in the home of Simon the leper, of whom nothing more is said.

He may have been, and this is speculation, but he may have been the father of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. In John's Gospel especially, you get the feel that this is taking place in the home of Lazarus, though it is never explicitly stated that this is the case.

But it seems, or it has that feel about it. And then how do you reconcile with the clear indication given in all three Gospels that it was in the home of this man, Simon the leper?

Well, possibly, possibly the explanation is a simple one, that he was the father. We don't know, but that's a possibility. If this is a different man, that's possible.

Then in that case, Lazarus and Mary and Martha were there as guests. And the implication would seem to be that they were very close to this man, knew him very well, and were almost part of the family.

[6 : 18] Certainly their behavior would give that impression. In any case, in this home, the men are reclining at the table, and something unexpected occurs.

A woman enters the room and approaches Jesus. I wonder if there was a sense of almost expectation. What is she doing? Why is she approaching Jesus? She wasn't carrying food, as might have been expected if she was serving them.

She has this jar of perfume. What's going on? Did she catch them by surprise? Was there sufficient time for them to wonder expectantly what was going to happen next?

We don't know. But she then breaks the jar she is carrying and pours the contents on Jesus' head. John tells us that when she does so, immediately the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

That perhaps explains why it was that those who were present were able to so quickly come to an opinion on the volume of this perfume. Otherwise, how could they have known the value of it?

[7 : 24] And yet, we're clearly given a monetary value for this perfume. John also says something that has generated for some a difficulty, in that John tells us that the perfume was poured on Jesus' feet, and that Mary proceeded to wipe his feet with her hair, as we've read.

But I think we can fairly state that far from being irreconcilable, you can imagine a possible train of events.

The perfume is first poured on Jesus' head, possibly because of the quantity involved. It runs down His body, though that maybe seems a little difficult to imagine.

Or in any case, having anointed His head, Mary then proceeds to anoint His feet as a separate action, but part of the one anointing.

In any case, it's not difficult to very reasonably and fairly reconcile the seeming differences between these two accounts on this detail.

[8 : 31] Perhaps Matthew and Mark had reasons to highlight that it was Jesus' head that was anointed, and in a moment we'll mention one or two possibilities in that regard.

Perhaps for John to focus on the anointing of Jesus' feet, and very particularly this action of washing His feet with her hair, serves to present this as an act of extraordinary devotion.

And I wonder also, and here we are very much going into the realm of speculation, but I wonder also if in John's account, this focus on Mary, washing or anointing Jesus' feet, doesn't constitute a form of mea culpa, in that in the following chapter, He presents us the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, where the men, the disciples, failed so miserably in being willing to even wash Jesus' feet.

And so as John arranges his material, he recognizes that here in the person of Mary, there was one who was willing to do what they were not willing to do, indeed to go beyond what they were not willing to do.

It may be that there is something in that. Of course, the immediate response to this act and the part of Mary is that those who are present were indignant.

[9 : 59] We read there in verse 4, some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, why this waste of perfume? And it goes on to tell us that they rebuked her harshly.

In Luke, it simply says, some of those present. And Matthew makes it clear that the some refers to the disciples. They are the ones who were indignant. They are the ones who harshly rebuke Mary.

And indeed, as we've read in John, Judas in particular is highlighted as harboring unworthy intentions for the money that could have been generated from the sale of the perfume. Well, that, in a small way, perhaps sets the scene, and we don't want to spend too much time, in a sense, simply recounting what is before us and what we've read.

Let us now return to and concentrate on these three opinions that are given by Jesus concerning the action of Mary. The first one, you'll remember, was this.

[11:03] She has done a beautiful thing to me. I wonder, is there not merit to simply, for a moment, just pause and consider what a beautiful thing that is to say, even before we try and analyze it too much?

Is it not a beautiful thing that Jesus says here concerning this woman who is being harshly rebuked by the disciples? And he says to them, just be quiet.

Don't bother her. She has done a beautiful thing to me. And I ask myself the question, I invite you to ask yourself the question.

I wonder, has Jesus ever thought that of me? Has he ever thought that of you? Has there been an occasion when there has been an act of devotion on your part, and Jesus' response, not verbally communicated in the way that it was here, is what a beautiful thing.

What a beautiful thing this disciple has done to me. Have we given him occasion to consider our acts of devotion in this manner?

[12:19] But let's think a little bit more about this beautiful thing that she had done. The Greek word that is used here, that is translated in the New International Version by the word beautiful, and indeed by several of the modern translations, is the Greek word kalos.

Now that Greek word can mean two things, two related things. It can mean good. And I think I'm right in saying that in the King James, that is the word that is used.

She has done a good thing. It is a good act that she has done. But it also means, and context really is all that can help us, or can help us in any case, determine what would be the appropriate translation.

It can also mean beautiful. And that's the word that the translators have chosen here in the version that we are considering. And it seems to me that to translate the word as beautiful is indeed appropriate.

Jesus is not saying on this occasion that the action of Mary was morally upright in that sense. Good, morally good.

[13:31] The right thing to do. Jesus is saying that what Mary has done was a beautiful act. It was a beautiful expression of devotion. Indeed, it was beautiful precisely because she did not have to do it.

She was under no moral compulsion. This was not the right thing to do. And Mary wasn't struggling with her conscience. Well, I know it's the right thing to do. Well, will I do it? Won't I do it?

Yes, I must do it because it's the right thing to do. No. This wasn't what was driving her. What was driving her was her devotion. She wanted to do it. This was something that she took delight in doing.

It was a beautiful thing that she did. She was driven wholly by love and devotion. She wasn't going the extra mile, if we can use that biblical terminology.

She wasn't going the extra mile, well, I'll just go a little further than others have gone. No, she was going in a whole new direction as regards devotion to the Master.

[14:36] And she does so because she wants to. She wants to do this. It was a beautiful thing. It was beautiful in what it declared concerning the love of Mary for Jesus, and beautiful indeed in the pleasure that it afforded Jesus.

It was an expression of love at so many levels or in so many ways. It was an expression of extravagant love, and it was certainly an extravagant act of devotion.

This is highlighted. It's highlighted in the indignation of the disciples who helpfully provide us with an indication of just how extravagant it was. This was worth more than a year's wages.

Just imagine. Bring it into our own terms. It was indeed an extravagant expression of love. It was also an expression of public and unashamed love.

If Mary had thought about it, I don't know if she did. I don't know if she wondered about what the reaction might be. We don't know if she did or if she didn't.

[15 : 48] But if she did wonder, well, what will people say if I do this? Will people rebuke me as they did? If she thought these things, they certainly didn't hold her back.

You see, she couldn't care less what the disciples thought. She wasn't interested in their rebukes or in their opinions. She was concerned only to make this expression of public and unashamed love. I don't care what they think. I don't care if they think that I've lost the place altogether. This is what I want to do. It was an expression of devoted love and not the love that we might imagine or that could exist between equals, but the love of a servant, a devoted servant for her faithful master. This is the love that we find presented to us in what Mary has done and that Jesus describes as a beautiful thing.

She has done a beautiful thing. The disciples, they consider it in a very different way. They think it is foolish.

[17 : 04] They think it's inappropriate. They think it's ill-advised. They think it's fanatical. We can maybe multiply the adjectives that would probably quite accurately describe their opinions.

But Jesus says it is a beautiful thing. Well, what about us as disciples of Jesus Christ? Can you do a beautiful thing for Jesus?

You might say, well, He's not here with us. We don't have that access to Him that Mary had. We can't go into a room and in some symbolic way or in some extravagant way declare our devotion. Are we then denied the opportunity to do a beautiful thing for Jesus? Well, by no means. Let me just read to you verses that you will be very familiar with.

But as we read them, they make it very clear that there is ample opportunity for us today where we are in this city to do a beautiful thing to Jesus.

[18 : 11] In Matthew chapter 25 and in verse 34 and following we read, Then the king will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after me.

I was in prison, and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you, a stranger, invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you?

When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The king will reply. And here particularly, let's concentrate our attention. The king will reply, I tell you the truth.

Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. It needs, I think, no further commentary.

[19 : 18] There is ample opportunity for you and for me to do a beautiful thing to Jesus. Certainly, what we find there in Matthew's gospel provides us with a good start.

But of course, there are other ways in which we can demonstrate our devotion, express our devotion to Jesus. We can do so in the manner that we give of ourselves, of what we are and what we own, to further the cause of the kingdom.

Where can we start in this matter of giving? Mary gave something that was worth a great deal to her. She gave generously. She gave extravagantly.

Where can we start? Well, we could start right here. We have, as you well know, the challenge and the opportunity of giving for the refurbishment of this building, that it might serve us in serving others.

Is any one of us obliged to give sacrificially? I would say no. We're not obliged to do so. You're not obliged to do so.

[20 : 27] Is there some unavoidable moral compulsion for you to give extravagantly? I would suggest not. No such compulsion. No such obligation.

But there is the opportunity. The opportunity for extravagant love, for devoted love, for generosity that might seem to some foolish or ill-advised.

Extravagant generosity is within the reach of all. So, Jesus describes the action of Mary as beautiful. She has done a beautiful thing to me.

But He also says something else. The second thing that He says about what Mary does is, She did what she could. There in verse 8.

She did what she could. From the height, if you wish, of a beautiful thing to the refreshing practicality of, She did what she could.

[21 : 31] Yes, it was an extravagant act of devotion. But it was also something she could do. It was, we can be fairly confident, her perfume.

It was her choice. It was her decision. This was something she could do. Perhaps many of the other women who followed Jesus and who were devoted to Jesus, they couldn't have done that.

They weren't owners of such expensive perfume. But Mary was. How she came into possession of such a precious quantity of perfume, we don't know.

Perhaps it was a family heirloom. Perhaps it was something she had received as a gift. Perhaps she herself, by different means, had managed to secure ownership of this perfume. But it was hers to do with as she pleased.

She could do this. She did what she could. And what does this expression of Jesus tell us? She did what she could. Well, I think it tells us at least three things.

[22 : 31] First of all, it tells us that Jesus knows us. He knew Mary's capacity to give. She did what she could. Jesus knew Mary.

He knew what was within her capacity. He knew what was out with her capacity. He knew her capacity to give. He knows our capacity to give. He knows our capacity to love.

He knows our capacity to serve. He knows what we can do. And He knows also what we cannot do. Jesus knows us. But secondly, these words of Jesus, I think we can reasonably, legitimately conclude, tell us that Jesus expects.

Yes, we've already made the point and we reiterate the point that there was no moral compulsion on Mary. But the suggestion is certainly that Jesus expects His disciples to do or to give what they can.

She has done a beautiful thing to me and she did what she could. No more, but also no less. So, Jesus knows us.

[23 : 39] Jesus expects of us and also there is a response on our part. Our response to our appreciation of who Jesus is and the love that we bear to Him.

That involves, requires a response. How are we to respond? Well, we are to do what we can. And so, I ask myself the question and I ask you the question, are you doing what you can?

Could you do more? Are you giving what you can? Could you give more? Could you give more?

Jesus does not ask of us to do more than we can, but He does invite us to consider the example of Mary who did what she could.

But then there's the third statement that Jesus makes concerning Mary and concerning particularly this action in anointing Him. She has done a beautiful thing to me.

She did what she could. And then, finally, she poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Now, there's considerable debate about this aspect of what Mary did that Jesus highlights.

[24 : 46] The question that is posed is, did she know that she was doing this? Did she know that she was anointing Jesus for His burial?

Was this on her horizon as she performs this act of devotion? And I have to say that when I first read this, and indeed on previous occasions, and if you'd asked me what my view on that was before giving it a little more thought, I think my view would have been that no.

No, she didn't know. What Jesus says, obviously, is true, but Mary didn't know that. When Mary pours this ointment on, or this perfume on Jesus, she didn't know that this was significant in this particular way of preparing Him for His burial.

But I wonder. There are different options. There are different ways of imagining what it was that Mary considered she was doing. You know, at a simple level, we might suggest that Mary simply felt that, well, Jesus was an honored guest.

He was a loved guest. And this was one way in which she could express her love and devotion to this honored guest and master. And, of course, that would be entirely legitimate, and it would be entirely consistent with what Jesus says of her action.

[26 : 17] But maybe there was more. Maybe Mary did consider Jesus to be a kingly figure. And as a kingly figure, what more appropriate than she anointed with this perfume on her head.

Maybe she considered Jesus to be the Messiah. Maybe she didn't have a full understanding of in what way He was the Messiah. Didn't have a full understanding of what the implications of that

were.

But maybe she did have some grasp of the Messiahship of Jesus. And what more appropriate than to anoint the anointed one.

And so, if that is so, what we have here is not only a profession of love, but we have a profession of faith. She is declaring something of what she believes concerning the Master.

Perhaps we could go further. Perhaps Mary perceived that Jesus was indeed on the threshold of death.

[27 : 18] Now, she could have done so purely on the basis of reading the signs. She would have been aware of a growing opposition to Jesus. She would have been aware of the hostility, the violent hostility of the religious leaders.

She was conscious that they were in Bethany, just a stone's throw from Jerusalem, which was the most dangerous place for Jesus to be. And so, even on that very simple basis, she could have done the maths and said, Well, maybe my Master isn't going to survive.

Maybe He is going to be arrested. Maybe He is going to die. Maybe He is going to die.

Perhaps she also, as the disciples certainly had, she had heard Jesus Himself speak of His impending death. And perhaps unlike the disciples, she believed Him and took it at face value.

Jesus has said, He said, the Master has said that He is coming to Jerusalem to die. Well, I want to prepare Him for His burial. Indeed, if she was persuaded that Jesus was soon to die, how could she testify to this conviction?

[28 : 50] See, Mary, as a woman, she wouldn't have been able to involve herself in the debates and conversations of the disciples if they did indeed have such debates concerning these strange things that Jesus was saying. But by this dramatic action, she could conceivably be declaring to Jesus and to all, I do believe what the Master has said about His death, His impending death here in Jerusalem.

Having presented these different possibilities, I think we have to recognize that it's not possible to come to a definitive conclusion on what Mary did or did not understand, or indeed how she understood what it was she was doing.

Indeed, whether she appreciated or not that she was preparing Jesus for His burial is not maybe of great importance.

Certainly it is the case that Jesus understood the significance of Mary's action, and that is important. There is in Jesus, as He interprets, if you wish, Mary's action, as He goes to the root of the reason for it, from God's perspective, if you wish.

There is in Jesus this prophetic certainty concerning what awaits Him in the days that follow.

Indeed, there is in this account a prophetic certainty not only about His impending death, but about His impending resurrection and the extension of the kingdom and of the gospel around the world.

[30 : 23] He speaks of that in this very incident. What this woman has done will be spoken of whatever the gospel is preached. Notice just how clear Jesus' vision is, not only about the fact that He's just about to die, but what goes on beyond, indeed, what's going on today.

Even what we are doing this evening in considering this account was in Jesus' mind as He comments on what Mary has done.

This anointing is a reminder to Jesus, in terms of His own particular needs as He faces death, a reminder to Jesus that He is not alone.

The disciples may be confused and oblivious to His impending death. Perhaps Mary also, we don't know. But the Father, His Father in heaven, so orders events that Jesus has granted the comfort of this anointing, the comfort that evidently He enjoyed from this anointing, as He describes it as a beautiful thing.

Well, as we think of this third aspect or this third opinion of Jesus concerning the anointing of Mary, that it is a preparation for His burial, we might say, well, here there's not really so much room for application.

[31 : 41] This aspect of Mary's action was, by its very nature, unrepeatable. And yet, though there maybe isn't a direct application, there is surely a challenge. If Mary acted in this devoted way, on the basis of, in all probability, a very limited understanding, what about us?

We who do know who Jesus is, we who do know and appreciate that He went on to death and the reasons for that, we who do know and are persuaded that He rose again triumphant from the grave, we who do know that He ascended to the right hand of the Father and even now is seated there

interceding for us, we who know all these things, does that knowledge not grant us an even greater motivation to express our devotion to Jesus.

And so I end as I began, and I ask you the question, have you ever done a beautiful thing to Jesus? This week would be a good time to start.

What will you do? Well, I don't know what you will do. But what I do know is that Jesus would have you do what you can. No more and no less. Let us pray.