

## “Extravagant Love”

Mark 14:1-11

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The commandments of God include honoring your father and mother, having God alone as your god, not murdering and not stealing.

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment he replied without hesitation:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.”

What does it mean to “love” him?

If Jesus were to come to your home this evening, what would you say and do?

- How would you greet him?
- Would you try to get him food and drink, to see to his needs?
- Would you want to sit and talk with him?
- Would you quickly think to ask favors of him?
- Would you un-self-consciously think to show your love for him?

As I thought the last of those questions, about how I would show my love for him, I found it rather hard to imagine.

Oh, I can imagine trying to do things for him.

I can certainly imagine asking him questions and favors.

I can even imagine planning strategies for getting things done; but expressing my love for him – that is more difficult to imagine.

What would I do; how would I express it?

Maybe before that question is this one: Would I want to express my love to him?

I *know* Jesus, but do I have that kind of relationship with him?

**Mary made me think about these things.**

And the Mary I’m talking about is the woman in chapter 14 of the Gospel of Mark.

We are about a third of the way through the traditional Easter season and I'd like us to spend the four Sundays from now until Easter Sunday looking at the last week before Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's called "Passion Week."

The movie "The Passion of the Christ" by Mel Gibson certainly popularized that old Latin word "passion."

Passion is the Latin and English translation of the Greek word for suffering.

In Mark's Gospel that passion/suffering week for Jesus begins with the planned betrayal of Jesus by Judas, which we find in chapter 14.

But the Gospel writer, Mark, does an interesting thing.

As he begins the drama of the final days before the crucifixion of Jesus, he relates an incident that had occurred several days earlier.

But he chooses to tell the story in the context of the plot to kill Jesus and the betrayal by Judas.

While he doesn't tell us **why** he does this, it certainly appears that he wants us to see the actions and attitudes of the woman Mary in contrast to the actions and attitudes of the others.

Stand with me please as I read from Mark 14:1-11:

"Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. <sup>2</sup> "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

<sup>MK 14:3</sup> While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

<sup>MK 14:4</sup> Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? <sup>5</sup> It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

<sup>MK 14:6</sup> "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> The poor you will always have

with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. <sup>9</sup> I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

<sup>MK 14:10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. <sup>11</sup> They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over."

## PRAY

I want you to notice that verse 1 says that the religious leaders "were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him."

And verses 10-11 tell us that Judas gave them the way; he would betray Jesus when the opportunity came.

It's interesting that Mark chooses to sandwich, into the telling of that covert plot, this story of the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume.

The characters in Mark's account include Judas and the religious leaders who hate Jesus and certainly the woman who loved him.

John, in his Gospel tells us that the woman was Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus – the Lazarus who had just been raised from the dead by Jesus. (John 12)

But in the story we also find others who are present.

- Mark simply refers to "**Some** of those present."
- John tells us that Lazarus was there.
- The host, Simon the Leper, is certainly there.
- Matthew in his Gospel tells us that the disciples were also present. (Mt 26)

I point this out to show you that we don't have only two kinds of people present – those who love Jesus and those who hate him.

We also have others who are somewhere between in their response to Jesus.

I wish to suggest that it isn't only the difference between the woman's loving actions and Judas' evil response that Mark wants us to think about.

Though to be sure, that contrast is evident.

Elizabeth Malbon writes, "Irony is manifest in the juxtaposition of the woman, who gives up money for Jesus and enters the house to honor him, with Judas, the man who gives up Jesus for money and leaves the house to betray him." (Elizabeth S Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus*, 57)

But few of us would identify with Judas – we don't hate Jesus.

But what Mark also wants us to think about is the difference in attitudes between the woman's loving but impractical actions and very practical response of the others.

What was behind her extravagant expression of love?

It was a dinner-party.

Considering how hostile the environment had become, this was a safe group – Jesus, his disciples, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and the host, one Simon the Leper.

We can only speculate about Simon.

Had Jesus healed him or was that an unfortunate name because of some past relative with the disease? We don't know.

The men were reclining around the low table in the customary fashion and Martha was serving; and from the Gospel of John we learn that was usual.

We don't know what the conversation was about but with Lazarus present, it seems likely that at least part of the evening was about his recent resurrection.

In the midst of it, Mary walks in with a small jar of very expensive perfume (worth a year's wages – at least \$30,000 in today's market) and pours it out on Jesus.

Now don't get the picture of a gallon of liquid completely soaking him.

But do imagine it is more than usual and she anoints his head and even his feet.

When she does this, “some others” in the room are chagrined and even angry with her.

We know Judas was, because John tells us so.

But both Matthew and Mark let us know Judas was not alone in his criticism of Mary.

Mark 14:4-5 “Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? <sup>5</sup> It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.”

You can easily imagine the flabbergasted expressions and then the not so silent under the breath (sotto voce) criticisms.

Then in agreement with each other they turn openly on Mary and angrily rebuke her –

- “Woman, what are you doing?
- “Don’t you have any regard for money and the poor?”
- “And furthermore, we love him too, you’re just getting carried away!”

They might have had a legitimate concern for the poor but what is noticeable is the contrast between Mary’s intense love and their lukewarmness.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, “If you consort with the common (Christian), and travel on the road to heaven so slowly that it is a question whether you are going there at all, then you will escape criticism: if you keep with those who practice the snail’s march they will call you a good easy man, a right respectable person. But if you run for it, if you put out all the energy of your nature, and are determined to live at a high pitch for Christ, you will get the cold shoulder, even from many of his disciples, for you will be practically condemning their half-heartedness...” (Spurgeon on Mark 14:6)

John, in his Gospel, makes it clear that Judas’ response was because of greed. (John 21:4-6)

But here we have more than Judas speaking; we hear the other disciples as well.

The others love Jesus but their practical natures get the better of them.

These are shrewd, practical, calculating men who, as Ray Stedman said it, “know the price of everything but the value of nothing.” (Ray C. Stedman, sermon on Mark 14 [www](http://www))

Mary was expressing her love for her Lord and the others were concerned about the cost.

No one is more concerned about the poor than God the Son, Jesus. There is a time and place to care for the poor and we must but **this wasn't about the poor this was about Jesus and Mary's love for Him.**

And incidentally but importantly, the poor will only be cared for rightly when the driving motivation is not simply humanitarianism but is love for Jesus.

For Jesus said elsewhere, what you did for the least of these you did for me.

And so Jesus responds in Mark 14:6-7 “Leave her alone,” “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.”

“You guys don't get it!”

“You critics let the good get in the way of the best. (France, *Mark*, 555)

“You are focused on reason and Mary's focused on relationship!”

“You are just thinking, while Mary is just loving.”

“Mary didn't come in here calculating the cost to her.

“She came with the best she had and she gave it all.

“When she broke the neck of that jar she didn't have in mind giving me just a part of it – she committed it all.

“You guys give to me, but you do it with caution, care and calculation.

“You call it prudence, wisdom, conservation, and good planning.

Again from Spurgeon, “Usual donations have very little beauty in them — those moneys dragged out of people by (pleading) — that (dollar) dribbled out by custom because it is a respectable amount. There is nothing to satisfy love in the (begrudged little) which comes forth like an unwilling taxation, which a miser could scarce withhold. But oh, to give to the Lord Jesus freely, richly, whatever it is with which he has entrusted us, whether it be gold or genius, time or words — whether it be the minted coinage of the purse, or the living courage of a loving heart, or the labor of an earnest hand! Let us give our Well-beloved the best we have, and he will call it beautiful. Mary’s gift was all for him, and all for love, and it was done at great (cost to her), and therefore it was beautiful. (Spurgeon on Mark 14:6)

Mary’s love is extravagant, over-the-top, above reason.

Jesus goes on to say in Mark 14:8 “She did what she could.”

That is literally: “What she had she did.”

The point is not the amount.

William Wordsworth wrote, “High heaven rejects the lore  
Of nicely calculated less or more.” ([www.brainyquotes.com](http://www.brainyquotes.com))

Earlier in the Gospel of Mark we are told the widow woman who came to the Temple and gave her last two copper coins in offering to God.

Mary is different from the widow woman in that Mary had **much** to give.

But Mary is **like** the widow in that they both gave all.

As I have repeated probably too often, “Generosity is not measured by how much one gives but by how much one has left.” (From Nelson sermon on Mark 12)

When it came to her **love** for Jesus, nothing was too much.

She gave it all.

Mary did what the Spirit led her to do.

She did not copy others, she did not envy what others could do, she simply did what she could do — and she didn’t just think about doing it, she just did it!

Mary had no thought, no intention, that her act would have eternal consequences BUT Jesus took her gift and “anointed” it.

He said in Mark 14:9 “I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

But that wasn’t Mary’s motivation.

J.Sidlow Baxter in his book entitled *Going Deeper* writes that we love Jesus in at least three ways:

Now the categories are imprecise but I think they get at something of what is going on with Mary and hopefully with us over time.

**First, we love him gratefully.**

This love springs from what he has done for us.

“We love him because he first loved us and died for us...”

Many years ago a man, unable to swim, fell from a wharf in London into the water.

Another man, noticing the desperate struggle, risked his own life and rescued the drowning man.

A few days later the saved man’s wife and children came to the home of the rescuer.

Saying that she had not money, she wanted to know if she and the children could simply kiss him in gratitude.

Simple gratitude is the earliest and most elementary form of love for Jesus.

**A second kind of love, loves him reciprocally.**

This is a shared love.

This is the love we feel when we come to realize his presence with us.

Someone wrote, “Even the deepest self-consciousness gradually becomes penetrated by a deeper Christ-consciousness.”

We are aware of his presence at all times; a reciprocal companionship, a mutual sharing develops in all of life.

We love him not only because he first loved us but because he is like a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24).

We love him not only for what he has done for us but because **of what he has become to us.**

**But the third kind of love is loving him Adoringly.**

This is loving him not only for what he has done, or because of what he has come to mean to us in our daily experience, but **because of who he is.**

It was 1732 in Germany when two young Moravian men committed their lives to preaching the gospel to the 3000 slaves of the Island of St Thomas.

The atheist slave-holder had vowed that no preacher would ever set foot on his island.

It is told that Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann had to sell themselves as slaves to gain access to the others.

As they departed Germany, family and friends, knowing they would never see them again, gathered to ask whether it was worth it and to plead with the to stay.

The response from the two young men was: "May that Lamb that was slain, receive the reward of his suffering!"  
The Lord is worthy!

I think this is the love Mary felt.

This is the love I want to know.

Listen to Baxter: “On earth he lived the most strangely and compelling beautiful life ever seen or known. He was the purest, noblest, strongest, most tender, loftiest, humblest, kindest, most patient, sympathetic, utterly virtuous character ever clothed in human nature. His self-abnegating “otherism” was sublime. So intent was he on relieving others that he forgot food for himself. It was his very breath to share, to soothe, to help, to forgive, and so to love with a great-hearted compassion. He never answered “no” when a needy one sought him... He so lived that he willingly died for those who least deserved it and with no retaliation except to pray, “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” The utter meekness and sinless simplicity of his life are only equaled by the sheer majesty and glory of it...” He is the supreme object of adoration. (J Sidlow Baxter, *Going Deeper*, 116)

And feeling that love for Jesus, Mary’s response was above reason.  
Her love was extravagant.

William Barclay wrote, “If love is true, there must always be a certain extravagance in it. It does not nicely calculate the less or more. It is not concerned to see how little it can decently give. If it gave all it had, the gift would still be too little. There is a recklessness in love which refuses to count the cost.” (Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 327)

Little children do that easily.

You say they don’t understand the cost of what they give, so surely it is easy for them.

But you miss the point.

They don’t consider the cost as great or small, because they aren’t thinking of cost; they are thinking only of value – the value of the relationship.

I love Kent Hughes’ story about his pre-school son years ago.

Kent’s wife, Barbara, had won a beautiful decorator recipe box and then copied and placed all of her recipes in it.

Their four-year-old son, also named Kent, had seen this and knew the box was special to her.

When Barbara's birthday came along some friends were there and asked to see the recipe box.

She couldn't find it and about the time she was ready to call out to little Kent about the missing box, he showed up with something behind his back that was dripping with water.

Though she knew instantly what it was, she also saw the love in his eyes as he held it out to her as his gift on her birthday.

He had taken the box, dumped the recipes in the garbage (which by then had been taken by the garbage collectors) and then scraped off the decorations, lining the box with his own tinfoil.

He handed it to her and when she opened it she found a nickel, a small plastic alligator and a picture of her little boy.

Kent Hughes says that his wife still has that box as one of her most treasured possessions.

Not because of its cost but because of its value – the gift was out of pure, innocent love. (Hughes, *Mark Vol. 2*, 147)

That's what I want my love for Jesus to become.

I want it to be more than gratitude, more than a reciprocating friendship; I want it to be a love that knows no bounds - reckless, extravagant love.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Century hymn writer captured something of it when he penned these words:

My God, I love thee, not because  
I hope for heaven thereby,  
nor yet because, if I love not,  
I must forever die.

Not with the hope of gaining aught,  
not seeking a reward,  
but as thyself hast loved me,  
O everlasting Lord.

So would I love thee, dearest Lord,  
and in thy praise will sing;  
because thou art my loving God

and my eternal King.

I like Marva Dawn's description of worship as a "royal waste of time."  
Meaning that to the world, worship **looks** like a waste of time –  
nothing useful is accomplished they say.

Even Christians now require that worship be utilitarian.  
They say our worship ought to attract people to God.

Dawn writes, "Of course, people will be attracted when we worship well, but if we make such appeal the focus of worship, then God will no longer be. Worship is idolatry unless it is a total waste of time in earthly terms, a total immersion in the eternity of God's infinite splendor for the sole purpose of honoring God." (Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, 11)

So I ask you, "Do you love Jesus?"

That I ought to love Jesus, I understand.

That I am grateful for what he has done, I understand and feel.

That he is with me and I may know him – that understanding and relationship is growing.

That I may adore him with abandoned, uncalculated love, as Mary loved – that I want.

I don't know how to end this sermon in a tight, tidy, practical, three-steps-to-loving-Jesus way.

Instead I invite you to bow with me before him and seek his grace to love as he is worthy of being loved.

Other notes:

“I do not know whether all the disciples felt grieved, but we are told by Matthew that “they had indignation,” and he seems to speak of them as a body; from which I gather that those who love Jesus much must not measure their conduct by that of Christ’s ordinary disciples, indeed it might fare ill with them even if apostles became their judges. They must not tone down the fervor of their zeal to the lukewarmness of the general order of Christian men: they must not measure the consecration of their lives by the little which many professors present upon the altar to God. (Spurgeon on Mark 14:6)

Giving for the poor was a part of the Passover celebration.

Historically giving to the poor was part of Lord’s Supper celebrations as well.

For that reason we collect benevolence offerings as part of our Lord’s Supper observances.

Might Simon the Leper have been the father of Mary et al. as 11<sup>th</sup> C. Theophylact suggests? (Edwards, *Mark*, 413 footnote)

To protect herself or her property rather than spend it on Christ and his purposes (would be) betrayal of her devotion. (William Barton, *Day By Day with Jesus*, 24)

Selfishness blames love for being too profuse, wasteful.

The third beauty of the action was that IT WAS DONE WITH CONSIDERABLE SACRIFICE. There was an expense about it, and that of no trifling character to a woman who was neither queen nor princess. I shall always feel obliged to Judas for figuring up the price of that box of costly nerd. He did it to blame her, but we will let his figures stand, and think the more of her the more he put down to the account of waste. I should never have known what it cost, nor would you either, if Judas had not marked down in his pocket-book that it “might have been sold for much.” (Spurgeon on Mark 14:6)

Of Judas amidst the other disciples: “Proximity to Jesus does not guarantee faithfulness.” (Edwards, *Mark*, 412)

“There are a great many useless things which, in Heaven’s estimate, are more valuable than a great many apparently more practical ones.” (Alexander MacLaren, *Mark*, 163)

There is room in the Christian life for acts of devotion, which are utterly unpractical and branded by loveless souls as “waste.” (William Barton, *Day By Day with Jesus*, 24)

“Great love demands unique expression. Love is inventive...” Barton, 25)

There is not indication that the woman knew she was doing a burial anointing.

But like Caiaphas she was saying more than she knew.

John 11:50 “it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.”

According to the Rabbis, burying the dead was considered a greater work than giving to the poor because the poor can be given to at any time but the dead must be cared for immediately (Garland, *Mark*, 517)

Lazarus’ greatest witness, was “not in what Lazarus did for Jesus. It is in what Jesus did for Lazarus.” (Hughes, *John*, 295)

“Love can see that there are chances do thing which comes only once. It is one of the tragedies of life that often we are moved to do something fine and do not do it. It may be that we are too shy and feel awkward about it. It may be that second thoughts suggest a more prudent course. It occurs in the simplest things – the impulse to send a letter of thanks, the impulse to tell someone of our love or gratitude, the impulse to give some special gift or speak some special word. The tragedy is that the impulse is so often strangled at birth. This world would be so much lovelier if there were more people like this woman, who acted on her impulse of love because she knew in her heart of hearts that if she did not do it then, she would never do it at all. How that last extravagant, impulsive kindness must have uplifted Jesus’ heart.” (Barclay, *Mark*, 327)