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MARY'S ALABASTER BOX

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adapted from J. Mark Jordan

“After being away on business, Tim thought it would be nice to bring his wife a little gift. ‘How about some perfume?’ he asked the cosmetics clerk.

She showed him a bottle costing \$50.00. ‘That’s a bit much,’ said Tim, so she returned with a smaller bottle for \$30.00.

‘That’s still quite a bit,’ Tim complained. Growing annoyed, the clerk brought out a tiny \$15.00 bottle. ‘What I mean.’ Said Tim, ‘is I’d like to see something really cheap.’ So the clerk handed him a mirror.”

The book of John does not give us a true chronological account of the events of Jesus' life during this last week. At this point John inserts a flashback to describe the feast in Bethany and the beautiful act that Mary performed. The religious leaders were meeting to plot against Jesus, but His friends were meeting to show their love and devotion to Him.

By joining these two accounts, John showed the connection between Mary’s worship and Judas’ betrayal, for it was after the feast in Bethany that Judas went to the priests and offered his help (**Mark 14:10–11**). The Lord’s rebuke triggered Judas’ response.

The feast at Bethany took place “six days before the Passover” (**John 12:1**) in the house of Simon the leper who had been healed by the Lord Jesus. There were at least seventeen people at this dinner: Simon, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus, and the 12 Apostles. True to her character as the “doer” in the family, Martha did the serving (**Luke 10:38–42**).

Mary is identified in verse 7. John identifies her as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. She is found only three times in the Gospels, and in each instance she is at the feet of Jesus.

- She sat at His feet and listened to the Word (**Luke 10:38–42**);
- she came to His feet in sorrow after the death of Lazarus (**John 11:28–32**);
- she worshiped at His feet when she anointed Him with ointment (**John 12:1ff**).

Mary was a deeply spiritual woman.

- she found at Jesus' feet her blessing,
- she brought to Jesus' feet her burdens, and
- she gave at Jesus' feet her best.

I want you to see four things in this scriptural account as they apply to us. First, the resource of Mary; second, the rash act of Mary; third, the reason for Mary's sacrifice; and fourth, the response of the disciples.

THE RESOURCE

Mary was not a wealthy woman. This alabaster box containing such expensive perfume very possibly represented her life's savings. It was worth approximately 300 denarii, which was about a year's salary in those days.

Alabaster is a beautiful semi-transparent gemstone. It was used to make containers, which would hold only the most expensive and precious contents. When the contents were extremely precious, the makers would work the stone in such a way that the only way to empty it would be to break the container. This perfume was made from the oil of an herb plant called nard and was only found in India in Biblical times, so this was a precious import, and it could very well have been a family heirloom passed down from generation to generation. In biblical times, perfume was stored in an alabaster jar and could only be used once. Once you broke the seal of the jar, it had to be used at that moment, or it would lose its fragrance. Mary knew that this would be a one-time deal. She was willing to give it all or nothing.

Therefore, Mary's resources were limited. She did not have the means to do what she did. She had probably secreted this alabaster box away for a long time, thinking that if times ever got really tough, she would have something to fall back on. It's not so much what you give to God that counts in his eyes. It is how much you give means to you that matters. We tend to measure our gifts horizontally... that is we figure out how much is expected of us or how much we think is reasonable and fair, and we give accordingly.

We need to give our gifts to God on a vertical measure. Make it between you and God, not you and the world.

THE RASH ACT

Sacrifice never seems reasonable. I am not speaking exclusively of financial matters here. I will tell you that any time you contemplate making a step for God, it will seem to you and to others around you as rash or unreasonable. What? Give up your career? Give up your status? Give up your good looks? Give up your freedom and independence? Give up your friends?

Serving God never works out on paper, especially when the devil is telling you what numbers to write down. But God has a mathematical equation he uses that the devil can't touch. It can be found in **Luke 6:38**:

³⁸Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Things that don't make sense to you always make sense to God.

Mary anointed both the head and the feet of the Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. A woman's hair was considered her glory (**1 Cor. 11:15**). She surrendered her glory to the Lord and worshiped Him with the precious gift that she brought. It was an act of love and devotion that brought fragrance to the whole house.

The alabaster box of ointment contained something that was very precious, but as long as it stayed in the container, it didn't benefit anyone. John says that when the perfume was poured out upon Jesus, that its fragrance filled the house. Jesus called the act a good work, and the original Greek expression actually means "a beautiful thing." God has given each one of us a spiritual gift. It may be great faith, acts of service, hospitality, teaching, or some other gift. But if you keep that gift to yourself, it benefits no one. It is your responsibility as a Christian to figure out what your gift is and then to use it for the glory of God and the benefit of those around you. What good is the gift of praise if you never praise? What good is the gift of leadership if you never lead?

When Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair, she walked away smelling like Jesus did. When we use what we have for Jesus, others can sense that we have been with Him. If your gift is mercy, you display the mercy that Jesus showed to us when He died in our place. If your gift is evangelism, then you display the love that Jesus

has for sinners. The use of our spiritual gifts causes others to sense Jesus' presence in our lives.

Mary couldn't do much, but she did what she could. That's what Jesus said about her in verse 8. Mary couldn't keep the Jewish leaders from falsely accusing Jesus. She couldn't keep the soldiers from crucifying Him or the crowds from mocking Him. But she could show her love and devotion by sacrificing the most precious thing that she possessed. You may be sitting here this morning thinking, I can't teach, I can't sing, I can't, I can't, I can't, but too often we focus on what we can't do instead of what we can. So what if you can't teach? Not everyone is meant to be a teacher. Can you call someone on the phone and invite him or her to church? Can you go and visit someone who is homebound or in the hospital? Can you bring food for the hungry? For us to accomplish great things in God's Kingdom, we must all work together, doing whatever we have the ability to do.

THE REASON

It is important for us to remember that Jesus had been teaching his disciples that he was going to die. They did not believe him. We can turn to **Matthew 16:21-23** and read:

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus' rebuke of Peter was an attempt to shock him back into reality. God will always warn us of things that are coming. Either he will use His Word or the words of his people, or He will use incidents that take place in the world. The Bible always judges us on the basis of our commitment to God not on our success (or lack thereof) in this world—according to the definitions of this world.

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷"For the Son of Man is to come with his

angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸*Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*” **Matthew 16:24-28**

Because she had listened to His word, Mary knew that soon Jesus would die and be buried. It seems that she also knew that His body would not get the traditional care given to the dead because His body would be considered corrupt (**Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:22–28**).

Too many people wait until they see their way clear before they act. Not so with Mary. Instead of anointing His body after His death, she did so before His death. It was an act of faith and love.

THE RESPONSE

Mary’s act did something else. It revealed the carnality and true motive of Judas. Take note of this. Immediately, the disciples begin to criticize her. One gospel records that Judas is the most vocal. They claim that Mary has wasted this precious perfume and that she should have sold it and given the money to the poor instead. Could you imagine how Mary must have felt? After pouring out everything she had as an act of worship, she gets criticized and ridiculed by the disciples of Jesus. I am sure that her heart must have been broken just like the alabaster box that had contained her perfume.

But Jesus puts a stop to their criticism. He tells the disciples to leave her alone, because she has done a good work for Him. He says that they can help the poor anytime they want, but that they will not have very many more opportunities to show their love for Him in person. Jesus had told His disciples on several occasions that He was going to Jerusalem to be put to death, and now He tells them that Mary’s act of devotion will serve as the anointing for His death. Although Mary probably didn’t intend for her actions to be interpreted this way, the custom was to first bathe and then anoint the body of a dead person. After the body was anointed, the flask that contained the ointment was to be broken and laid with the body in the tomb. Jesus knew that He would be put to death as a criminal and that He would be buried without the proper anointing.

Jesus goes on to state that wherever the Gospel is preached that Mary’s act of devotion would be discussed and remembered. We are part of the fulfillment of that prophecy here today as we look at this Scripture.

Every sermon, every service, every act of sacrifice triggers both a positive and negative response. Some people are moved; others are resistant. Some surrender themselves; others are rigid and unmoved. It brings out the best in some; it brings out the worst in others.

⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) **John 12:4-6**

The disciples did not know the true character of Judas. His criticism of Mary sounded so “spiritual” that they joined him in attacking her. We know the real reason Judas wanted the ointment sold. It had nothing to do with the poor. The money would go into the treasury and he would be able to use it (**John 12:6**).

So we can understand what’s was at stake, let’s do some math! This amount of Denarii would be equal to a day’s wage for a laborer, which would be about \$58, assuming minimum wage. So, Judas saw about \$17,400 flow over Jesus’ feet and onto the floor! And he was not going to be able to have any of it for himself.

But in this one moment of time, Mary was making a great statement of surrender. By kneeling to Jesus and anointing Him, she was declaring her faith in Him as the Messiah. She was telling everyone who saw her do what she did that her faith was in the Lord Jesus Christ. She, at that moment, surrendered all to Him!

Her act of love and worship also made a big statement concerning who she believed Jesus to be. You see, there were four classes of people who were anointed in those days: Kings (2 Kings 9:3), Priests (Ex. 29:7), Prophets (1 Kings 19:16) and the dead (John 19:39-40; Luke 23:56; Mark 16:1). I believe that by her selfless act, Mary was acknowledging Jesus to be all of those things to her heart.

Certainly, Jesus is all of those things. He is the King of Kings, Rev. 19:16. He is the Great High Priest, Heb. 3:1. He is the Prophet, Matt. 13:31. He was dead, but is alive forevermore, Rev. 1:18. This is what Mary believed about Jesus, and she demonstrated her surrender to Him as all those things by her act of love and worship.

What are your resources?

What rash act are you prepared to do for God?

What ultimate reason or purpose will be served by your sacrifice?

What response will be triggered deep within your soul?

Whether we win or lose, we sacrifice. If we win here, wonderful. If we lose here, the reward will be on the other side.

*⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. **Hebrews 11:6***

What is Jesus worth to you? To Mary, He was worth everything that she had. To Judas He was worth 30 pieces of silver.

Follow Mary's example. Ask yourself, "What can I do?," and when you find the answer to that question, do it. Maybe generations from now, someone will be talking about your act of devotion just like we are talking about Mary's today.

To God be the glory.