Lesson Eleven

The Woman at Bethany:
Honoring Jesus Extravagantly

Focal Text
Mark 14:1-9

Background
Mark 14:1-9

Main Idea
As Jesus approached the crucifixion, a woman anointed him with expensive ointment, an act that Jesus praised as being in honor of his burial.

Question to Explore
How much is too much in showing honor to Jesus?

Quick Read
Jesus will use our present sacrifice for his eternal purposes.

Commentary
Rev. Louie Giglio has been mobilizing and inspiring young adults in America for many years. I first met him at his 2003 rally in the Dallas area that mobilized more than 25,000 college students for the Kingdom, where he made a statement I’ve never forgotten. The day before, horrific thunderstorms attacked the farm where the event was staged. College students’ tents were blown away; many had to sleep in their cars or on gym floors; electricity failed; the field was a mud pit.
When Louie began the rally by recounting all the students had endured, I thought he was going to thank them for their perseverance and suffering. Instead, he pointed his finger at the huge crowd and said, “And our God is worth all of that.”

When last did it cost you something significant to serve Jesus? What price would you pay to glorify him this week?

**Will you live for the One who died for you? (14:1-2)**

Our text begins: “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” (Mark 14:1). Passover was celebrated each spring on the evening of the 15th of Nisan (March/April on our calendar). It commemorated the miracle by which the Jewish first-born were preserved while Egyptian babies were killed (Exodus 12:1-30).

No work was permitted from the afternoon of the 14th through the 15th. Every Jewish male was expected to attend this and the other two pilgrim festivals (Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall). By some estimates, as many as two million people were crowded into Jerusalem for this observance.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began at the same time as Passover but was observed for an entire week (until the 21st of Nisan). It celebrated the barley harvest while reminding the Jews that they ate unleavened bread on their Exodus from Egypt. They were not allowed to have yeast in their homes during this time; the week began and ended with a religious assembly during which no work was permitted.

Since Passover began on Thursday evening, the event recorded in our text took place on Tuesday evening of Holy Week. Jesus had spent the day teaching in the temple, where he defeated the Pharisees and Sadducees in their attempts to discredit him (Matthew 21:23-22:46). He then exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders (Matt. 23),

As a result, “the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him” (Matt. 26:3-4). However, Jesus’ popularity was a major obstacle to their plans: “‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or the people may riot’” (Mark 14:2). The people had welcomed Jesus’ triumphal entry with great acclaim, considering him a prophet and rejoicing in his appearance (Matt. 21:1-11). If the authorities were to arrest this popular healer and teacher, they would provoke the “riot” they were trying to avoid.

This fact explains Jesus’ decision on Maundy Thursday to retreat to the Garden of Gethsemane, outside the city. There he knew Judas could find him and the soldiers could arrest him, under the cover of darkness and far from the crowds. If he had stayed in
Jerusalem during this week of crowded festivities, he would likely have been safe. But he “came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10), choosing to die for us.

Jesus calls us to do the same for him: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Paul exhorted us to present our bodies as a “living sacrifice” to our Lord (Romans 12:1). He testified: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Our culture separates Sunday from Monday, the *spiritual* from the *secular, religion* from the *real world*. God does not. All through Scripture, he is a King (see Matt. 4:17; 6:10, 33; Revelation 19:16). If God is your King, he is Lord of every dimension of your life, every day of your life. All you have and are belongs to him. One day you will give an account before him for your use of all that he entrusted to you (2 Corinthians 5:10).

The more we surrender, the more we are used and the more we are blessed. Paul could claim, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Revelation promises those who suffer for Christ: “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:16-17).

Can God call you to go anywhere, to do anything, to pay any price? Or is there an area of your life you will not surrender to his providential purpose?

**Would you face ridicule for your Lord? (14:3-5)**

Our text continues: “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” (Mark 14:3).

*A sacrificial gift*

Bethany was situated on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, two miles from Jerusalem. It was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and became Jesus’ home when he came to the Holy City (see John 11:1). He stayed in this town from Sunday evening through Wednesday evening of Holy Week.

“Reclining at the table” describes the typical posture by which a meal was eaten in Jesus’ day. The “table” was a low platform, eighteen inches from the ground. The people would
lean on their left elbow while eating with their right hand, with their bodies stretched on the ground away from the table.

On Tuesday evening, Jesus was invited to “the home of a man known as Simon the Leper”; the Bible gives us no further information regarding his identity. The fact that he was identified as “the Leper” may indicate that he had suffered at one time from this dread disease. Since there was no medical cure for leprosy in Jesus’ day, perhaps the man had been healed by Jesus himself (for an example of such healing, see Matt. 8:1-4). If this was the case, the dinner might have been Simon’s gift of gratitude for such a miracle.

While Jesus and the other guests were eating, “a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard.” John identifies her as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:3). Her devotion to Jesus was already well-known, as when she sat at Jesus’ feet while Martha cooked the meal (Luke 10:38-42).

On this occasion, she came to Jesus with “an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume.” An “alabaster jar” was a flask with a long neck and no handles. The top was sealed to preserve its contents. In this case, the contents were “pure nard,” a perfume made from oil taken from roots found in India and imported to the Middle East. The origin and cost of transportation made this perfume enormously expensive, so that it was worth more than a year’s wages (Mark 14:5).

Such an expensive possession might have been a family heirloom or part of Mary’s dowry. She had likely kept it for many years, only now choosing to use it. The fact that she “broke” the jar (syntripsasa, or shattered, crushed, broke into pieces) rather than removing the top shows the depth of her commitment. She clearly did not intend to keep any of the perfume for herself, using it all to anoint Jesus. She shattered the jar, so that it could not be repaired to be used again.

The fact that Messiah means anointed one may indicate that Mary intended her action to testify to Jesus’ true identity. If so, her sacrifice was a gospel presentation, as we’ll see shortly.

A sinful response
When Mary made her great sacrifice, “some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume?’” (14:4). John tells us that Judas was the primary disciple to object to Mary’s act, and that his motivation was financial greed: “He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:6).

Judas’s logic was intended to cover his true intentions: “It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor” (Mark 14:5a). “A year’s wages” was 300 denarii; a typical worker received one denarius per day. Their statement lends
credence to the theory that the perfume was a family heirloom, for a wealthy person
could make this sacrifice and still give to the poor.

Why would Mary’s critics reference such giving at this point in time? On the evening of
Passover, the Jewish people typically gave to the poor in their community (see John
13:29, “Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy
what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor”). Giving to those in
need was customary on special holy days (see Nehemiah 8:12; Esther 9:22).

As a result, “they rebuked her harshly” (Mark 14:5b). “Rebuked” translates enebrimonto,
or scolded, censured, warned sternly. Note the two-fold illogic of their response. First, if
the woman’s action was wrong, would Jesus not rebuke her before they were forced to do
so? Second, Jesus had consistently demonstrated his concern for the poor, as we will see
shortly. Her gift would not prevent their Lord from caring for such people of need.

Mary was not the last person to pay a public price for her personal sacrifice. Jesus would
be ridiculed by the soldiers (15:16-20), the chief priests (Matt. 27:41-43), and even the
robbers with whom he was crucified (Matt. 27:44). At Pentecost, his followers were
accused of being drunkards (Acts 2:13); Festus called Paul insane (Acts 26:24).

My youth minister used to say that if you and Satan are not running into each other,
you’re probably running with each other. Our enemy “prowls around like a roaring lion
looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). If the world rejected Jesus, it will reject his
disciples as well:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the
world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I
have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember
the words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master.” If they
persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will
obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not
know the One who sent me (John 15:18-21).

Jesus’ statement makes it clear that persecution is a fact of life for his faithful followers.
The more we engage our fallen culture, the more we will face its opposition. We ought
not be surprised when lost people act like lost people. When last were you ridiculed or
rejected for your faith?

Would you honor Jesus before the world? (14:6-9)
Jesus’ response to his disciples was swift: “‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you
bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me’” (Mark 14:6). His statement was an
imperative, commanding them to stop their ridicule instantly. She had done a “beautiful
thing” (*kalon ergon*, or *valuable work*), in contrast to their selfish and misguided response.

Jesus’ logic was clear: “The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me” (14:7). In no sense did Jesus minimize poverty or the importance of our response to it. When he began his public ministry, he chose to read from Isaiah 61:1-2, predicting that he would “preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Scripture describes God’s compassion for the poor:

- “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:18).
- “The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble” (Psalm 9:9).
- “He will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help” (Ps. 72:12).

God’s word calls us to care for the poor as he does: “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs” (Deut. 15:7-8). What happens if we harm them? “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them” (Proverbs 22:22-23).

Care for the poor is an essential element of Christian ministry:

- “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:15-17).
- “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18).

To summarize, the Lord said this of godly King Josiah: “‘He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?’ declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 22:16).

Rather, Jesus’ point was that our highest priority should be to love and worship our Lord: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). He made a similar response when asked why his disciples did not fast: “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast” (2:19-20).
While any service to the poor is valuable, what Mary did was even more commendable: “She did what she could” (14:8a). This statement reminds us that God asks of us only what we can do, not what we cannot. As the saying goes, he equips the called—he does not call the equipped. He seeks not ability but availability.

In Mary’s case, she did more than she knew: “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial” (14:8b). Anointing a body with spices and perfumes for burial was customary in Jesus’ day (see Luke 24:1, “On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.”) Jesus had been predicting his death and resurrection, but his disciples still did not understand their reality. Mary’s action was a foreshadowing of the sacrifice our Lord would soon make for us all.

As a result, Jesus added: “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” (Mark 14:9). Her action pointed to the “gospel,” the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. As that message was told, her sacrifice would be included. Jesus’ prediction came true in the Gospels of Mark and John as they preserved Mary’s story for all time.

Note that from the beginning, Jesus intended his gospel to be preached “throughout the world.” Christianity has always been a global movement (Matt. 28:19), inclusive of both Jews and Greeks (Galatians 3:26-29).

You cannot measure the eternal significance of present faithfulness. If you will honor Jesus publicly with your sacrificial service, he will use your obedience to advance his Kingdom in ways you cannot imagine. Would you pay any price to be used in this way by your Lord?

**Conclusion**

John Knox (1514-72), leader of the Scottish Reformation,¹ cried to God, “Give me Scotland or I die.” John Wesley (1703-91), co-founder of the Methodist movement,² proclaimed that “the world is my parish.” Henry Martyn (1781-1812), an Anglican missionary who was inspired by the stories of a Baptist, William Carey,³ landed on the shores of India and cried, “Here let me burn out for God!” David Brainerd (1718-47)⁴ coughed blood from tubercular lungs as he prayed in the snow for the American Indians. George Whitefield (1714-70)⁵ crossed the Atlantic thirteen times in a small boat to preach to the colonists. Jim Elliot (1927-56) died as a martyr in Ecuador, but not before writing in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”⁶
Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952)\(^7\) once spoke to a student convention on the needs of the Muslim world. He closed his appeal by standing before a large map of Muslim lands. Spreading his arms over it, he said, “Thou, O Christ, art all I need; and Thou, O Christ, art all they need.”

Do you agree?