

Mary's good work

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Preacher: Rev A.G.Ross

[0 : 00] Let us now turn to Mark's Gospel and chapter 14. Mark chapter 14. And reading from verse 3, Mark 14 and from verse 3.

And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard, very precious. And she broke the box and poured it on his head. And there were some that had indignation within themselves and said, Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence and had been given to the poor. And they murmured against her. And Jesus said, Let her alone, why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always. And whensoever ye will, ye may do them good. But me ye have not always.

[0 : 55] She hath done what she could. She has come aforehand to anoint my bed body to the burying. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.

In verse 6, these words, Let her alone, for she hath wrought a good work on me. She hath wrought a good work on me.

Or, She has done a beautiful thing to me. Let her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me. Now this lovely incident took place two days before the Passover. The place was Bethany in Simon's house. That is, in the home of a man who had, who once had leprosy. But had been cured of his leprosy. And the occasion was a meal at which Jesus and his disciples were present. Perhaps the reason for the meal was a gratitude for Simon's healing at Christ's hands.

[2 : 08] Now, three parties feature in this incident more prominently than the host. Nothing is said of Simon apart from the fact that this was, this took place in his house.

But three parties feature prominently in this incident and they are the woman, the disciples, and the saviour. And three facts emerge in connection with the three parties. And the facts are action, reaction, and counteraction. There was the action of the woman, the reaction of the disciples, and the counteraction of the saviour.

There was the action of the woman in anointing the Lord. There was the reaction of the disciples at the extravagance. And there was the counteraction of the Lord who said, leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me. Now, the woman in Mark is nameless. But in John's account of this, he tells us that she was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

[3 : 26] And her action in anointing the Lord Jesus was memorable. For the Lord, as it were, erected it for a memorial of her.

For all generations to hear of and to see. Now, we know that speeches and sermons are very soon forgotten. But not this kind of thing. It was a memorial of her.

Then, the disciples' reaction to Mary's action is now before us. And they said, what a waste! What extravagance! This perfume might have been sold and the money given to the poor.

What a waste! And they complained about the waste not in a mild or an unaffable way but with indignation. They were indignant at what Mary had done to the Lord.

And we are told that they murmured. And the word murmur here does not mean simply that they made low, indistinct sounds under their breath. It's a stronger word than that.

[4 : 36] It has in it the idea of grumbling and complaining to Christ. Indeed, they were impatient with Mary at what she had done. This terrible waste of the ointment.

Who knows, but perhaps they were annoyed. The disciples and others around. Perhaps they were annoyed more at her zeal than at the expense.

Perhaps she was too zealous, too full of love for Christ for their liking. It showed them up. And so they covered it over by saying the money could have been the ointment could have been sold and the money could have been given to the poor.

In other words, it was wasted on Jesus. Well, Christian zeal cannot be understood by the world. We must accept that. But when it is misunderstood by the church and by those who ought to know better, then it is hard to bear.

But zeal can be encouraged. Zealous love and devotion to the Lord Jesus can be encouraged and may ours be encouraged as we think of this incident.

[5 : 48] And notice this other thing that's brought before us here. Not only the action and the reaction but the counteraction. Leave her alone, Jesus says. Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her?

For she has done a beautiful thing to me. And what Mary did was good and right and noble even beautiful. She hath wrought a good work on me.

She has done a beautiful thing to me. And so we notice then the first of two things. Notice the beautiful thing she did. She had a jar of expensive perfume which she brought from her own home to Simon's house.

and at the appropriate time she broke it and poured it on the Lord Jesus quite simply and without any fuss and very quickly it was all over very quickly without any ostentation.

Now the charge of being wasteful may be reasonable to the outward eye. But there's more in this than meets the eye. And I'm sure we are meant to see below the outward action to the inward motive in Mary's heart.

[7 : 01] For the outward action symbolized the inward motive which Jesus immediately recognized and commended. It wasn't just the perfume and ointment that was poured upon him.

He saw the inward motive he recognized it immediately and he commended her for it. Now as we look at this beautiful thing that she did we think for one thing of the appropriateness of it.

The appropriateness of it. It was perhaps far more fitting than Mary realized at the time. For in Simon's house there was a king and when he entered Jerusalem to the hosannas of the crowd who acknowledged him as king no one anointed him king.

But there in Simon's house Mary in her own way did that very thing when she broke the alabaster box of ointment and poured it on him she anointed him as it were as king.

And in Simon's house there was a priest a pardon providing priest. Of course we don't know what concept Mary had of Christ's priesthood but nevertheless the very by anointing Jesus even if she didn't recognize his priesthood by anointing Jesus she did a very appropriate thing.

[8 : 31] For after all he was the one who had begun a good work in her and here she is now performing a good work on him.

She has done a beautiful thing to me. But the undisputed appropriateness of her action lay in the fact that she anointed him in view of his burial.

That's what Jesus says himself. She anointed him in view of his death. She anointed him in advance of his burial. She anointed him in preparation for his burial and that was Christ's interpretation of her action.

Not ours or anyone else's. Jesus interpreted her action in that light. She has anointed me in advance of my burial. Now we just don't know how much Mary knew about these things or how aware she was of the imminence of Christ's death.

But on the other hand we've got to remember that Mary was among the best listeners that Jesus had. It may not be an exaggeration to say that Mary was the best listener Jesus ever had on earth.

[9 : 46] For she was the one who sat at his feet in her own home in that same village of Bethany and heard his word. And there's nothing to indicate that she didn't do this as often as he came to the home.

And he went quite often we would gather to the home in Bethany. sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word. And so perhaps she had more insight into the death of Jesus or as much insight as the disciples had.

For we know this that the disciples kept putting the thought of Christ's death out of their minds. Peter said for example be it far from thee Lord but not Mary.

She faced up to it and anointed Jesus in advance of his burial. So what she did was fitting and appropriate in view of the person he was.

He was her king her priest her saviour the one who had begun a good work in her and now she was performing a good work on him.

[10:48] And it's the same Jesus on which we have the privilege of doing a beautiful work as well. But we'll think of that later her. Now the next thing we notice is the sacrifice of this beautiful work.

The sacrifice. What it meant for her. We are told that it was costly. It was expensive perfume. And we are in fact told the cost of it 300 pence.

Now that means nothing to us except this. That it was more than the average wage for a year in those days. More than the average wage.

The ordinary wage of a person in those days. 300 pence. And that's not our figure. That's the figure Judas put on it. John tells us in his account. And Judas was the treasurer.

He was shrewd. He knew about these things. Now that was a large sum for a person living as she did in a very ordinary home.

[11:50] Living a very ordinary life village. It was a large sum. The equivalent of a year's pay. Now perhaps if we were among the guests in Simon's house, some of us might have taken Mary aside and perhaps in our foolishness would have said to her, wouldn't ordinary olive oil have done just as well?

Couldn't you have gone to the Jerusalem bazaars and got something less costly than pure nard? Why the pure nard and the spiked nard? Something less would have done just as well.

I wonder what Mary would have said to that question, would have said to us as we met with her privately. I believe that you might have said something like this, only the best for the master, only the best for Christ.

Now it's not the actual perfume or the cost that we're interested in, it's the principle, only the best for Christ. And it's not simply the principle of doing something for him or serving him in some way, it's the principle of the best possible service that should be rendered to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the purest possible worship and devotion that should be given to him.

Any old thing will not do. how that rebukes us. Any little time that we may have at the end of the day is what we give to the church and to the things of God.

[13:28] Any little time that's left over. But any old thing will not do. Anything less than the best is unworthy. Let us notice this, that service can be rendered with great regularity, and can be rendered constantly and yet be less than the best, less than worthy.

Because it's not the regularity of the service that gives it its worthiness, it's the devotion with which it's given and the costliness to ourselves. Should we then give him what cost us little or nothing?

Well, Mary has the answer to that question, and it's here in this incident before us. Nothing but the best for Jesus. Pure nard. Pure nard. Symbolizing what was within our own spirit at that time.

No cheese pairing, no shortcuts, no leftovers for Christ. Well, may this come home to our own hearts, as we think so often of our cheese pairing as far as time is concerned and energy and so on for the things of the spirit, for the things of God.

That's the second thing, the sacrifice of it. And the third is this, the spontaneity of it, the willingness. See how ready and willing and even anxious she was to break the alabaster box of ointment and pour it on the Lord.

[14:54] And there's nothing to say that anyone put her up to it. No one put her up to it, as far as the record goes. No one suggested it, no one pressurized her into it.

Now, John, in his account of this incident, adds a helpful detail. He says that this ointment was kept. He quotes the Lord Jesus. She kept this ointment against the day of my bedding. That means that she bought it and she saved it and perhaps long before this incident took place, she had it all ready. So when the appropriate time came, she was ready with the ointment. It wasn't just a flash in the pan, just a bright idea she had just a few moments before she went to Simon's house.

It was something thought out. It was something prepared. She has kept this ointment, she saved it up for the appropriate day and for the appropriate time and that time had come.

[15:55] so that from the beginning her action was willingly thought out and the ointment then was willingly poured out. Not just a few sprinkled drops of this precious ointment, retaining most of it for herself, 300 pence at cost, a year's wage.

Not just a few sprinkled drops, but the lot. No sign of niggardliness, no grudging spirit in Mary's heart. It was a free will offering.

Now we know what that phrase means because we have our free will offerings in our congregations. But I wonder if our gifts to the Lord at that level are given as willingly and as spontaneously and with the same anxiety and longing as Mary's pure nard was given to Christ. She has done a beautiful thing to me. But of course it's not just the monetary gift. There's far more to it than that. We are to be like the Macedonians to whom the apostle refers in 2 Corinthians 8. The Macedonians who gave themselves first to the Lord. They gave themselves first to the Lord and then they gave their gift for the poor there in Corinth.

[17 : 15] and where this is done where we give ourselves first of all to the Lord then whatever we do for the Lord will be done with a willing mind and with a willing spirit made willing in the day of his power.

What a blessing that is. So we think of the willingness of this act the spontaneity of it. And then we think of this last thing in connection with this beautiful thing she did. the motivation behind it. The motivation. What prompted an action to which the disciples had such a reaction and Jesus a counteraction?

Well I think the first thing is love. I think this is the basic thing. It all rests on this. And the love that she had for the Lord Jesus in Simon's house on that occasion was not a new love. It wasn't a newly found love. She had that kind she had love when she sat at Jesus feet in her own home and heard him speak. And on that occasion it was a love and a devotion that was commended by the Lord Jesus.

[18 : 25] Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the good part which shall not be taken from her. And in the interval her love for the Lord deepened and became the basis of the sacrificial and willing act.

Her love was as pure as the nard from which the ointment came. Well may the same be said of us. May our love for the Lord Jesus be not only because he has shut up hell against us and opened up heaven before us.

That's good reason, that's reason enough for loving him. But let's go to higher ground and love him for his own sake. For the perfection of his nature.

For the loveliness of his person. For the beauty of his character. I think that was the kind of love that Mary had. I believe that Mary in her mind was saying this.

I love my master. And what she did outwardly symbolized the love that she had inwardly for the Lord Jesus. And then there was gratitude too in this outward act or breaking the alabaster box appointment.

[19 : 40] For where there is true love there will be true gratitude. Gratitude of the highest kind. She had received no doubt so much from the Lord Jesus as a result of his visits to the home in Bethany.

If he went there frequently and that's the impression we get then she received so much from those visits. Just to say nothing of the resurrection of her own brother.

and so she was full of gratitude as she met there with the disciples and with the Lord in Simon's house.

Gratitude for what the Lord had done for her for the way he blessed her down through the years. What shall we render to the Lord for all his benefits to us?

my dear friends let us be free in our gratitude as we think of the benefits that the Lord has given to us. Let's be free in our gratitude for example for his church and for the congregation perhaps to which we belong if that means much to us.

[20 : 48] Let us thank the Lord for it. Let's be free in our thankfulness to the Lord for the ministry of his word if that's been a blessing to us week by week. Let's be grateful to the Lord for the sacrament of the Lord's supper if that's been a means of grace to us down through the years.

Let's be more ready to give thanks to the Lord thanking the Lord for wives and husbands given us for the children that he has given us for every good and perfect gift that has come down to us from above to render thanks unto the Lord it is a comely thing and to thy name O thou most there was gratitude and perhaps too there was respect for the Lord for his person although he is born of our bone and flesh of our flesh very man of very man tempted in all points like as we are yet he is God over all and blessed forever and he was God over all in Simon's house and he is God over all in this world around us today however much he despised he is the king of kings the king of saints the king of nations the I am that I am and it's for us to have a healthy respect and regard for him not a servile one but a loving one one that is marked by gratitude and thankfulness well that's the first thing we notice the beautiful thing she did now let's bring this a little nearer home and notice secondly the

beautiful example she set the beautiful example she set quite unwittingly
Mary has set us an example to follow a standard to attain but not with an alabaster box of ointment we don't have that what then do we have what is our alabaster box of ointment what do we put in its place what is our beautiful work well I think in its widest sense it is the ointment the beautiful work of a daily walk with God Enoch like Enoch walk with God the it's a the ointment is a beautiful Christian character a beautiful Christian life a life lived to the glory of God a life of practical holiness and devotedness to the Lord I think that's the ointment in the alabaster box what's within our what's within our Christian life if we are Christian people at all it should be holiness unto the Lord a daily walk with God like Enoch and others now we can have ointment perfume or anything else laid up in a drawer hidden a drawer and in a drawer it's of no use to anyone but Mary's ointment wasn't hidden it wasn't wrapped up it was poured out and the house was filled with the ointment and my dear friends it's futile to think that we can have a holiness which we can wrap up and put away as it were with our Sunday clothes and take it out once a week that's just a make-believe holiness that's an unreal thing but real godliness practical holiness christ likeness is like Mary's alabaster box of ointment it's poured out and the house is filled with the odour of the ointment well now what does this kind of ointment of perfume consist of what are the principal parts what are the ingredients let us look at this as we as we close well

I'm sure there are several I just wanted to mention one or two I think we should begin with this ingredient of obedience obedience I think we said on Saturday that obedience begins with repentance and faith repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and we have no obedience until we repent and believe and until we repent and believe we have nothing worth filing in the alabaster box it's not worth breaking not worth breaking until we repent and it's through repentance that we endeavour after new obedience as our catechism tells us we endeavour after new obedience part of our repentance the outcome of our repentance we endeavour after new obedience obedience and this new obedience takes us right on through the Christian life obedience to God's law which is perfect obedience to the whole of God's law obedience to God's moral law obedience to the duties and precepts he has given us in his word for our growth and grace this is sure and certain that there is no godliness there is no holiness there is no perfume there is nothing in the alabaster box if there is no obedience as a

[26 : 04] John Murray says that we are not redeemed by obedience to the law but we are redeemed unto obedience to the law unto obedience to the law and this is an infallible evidence of sincere love for Christ is part of the fragrance of the ointment the ointment of true godliness and Christ likeness obedience then again we might think of this that there is in the alabaster box reverence reverence reverence for the Lord and reverence is born out of wonder and amazement and awe a wonder and amazement at who God is at what God has done at what God himself is G.K.

Chesterton says that the world will never starve for want of wonders but only for want of wonder may God himself fill us with holy wonder for himself holy amazement may we stand in awe and in amazement that we have such a God the kind of God we have A.W.

Tozer says that the greatest need of the moment is that light hearted superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up it's a plea for reverence and what a fragrant thing reverence is reverence for God is what fragrance it gives to our worship week by week and at the family altar reverence is not to be equated with dullness and drabness and deadness worship can be joyful as it ought to be and yet reverent and reverent joy and gladness are not boisterous or ostentatious or noisy or uncontrolled reverence joyful reverence is holy joy well may our life be reverent our worship life our prayer life all our life be lived in reverence for the Lord there's a fragrance about that that is all to his praise and glory then may I say the third notice the third thing there is also usefulness as something within the alabaster box of ointment one of the ingredients in the ointment usefulness for real faith or Christian living is not a stationary thing it's not a stationary thing we are not to be godly but motionless godliness is never motionless or static for there's always something to do for God godliness is not something we put into a glass case and look at from a distance it's not something we wrap in cotton wool and handle with care if we do it's certainly not godliness now how can you say that how can I say that for this reason that the true Christian the godly person as soon as he's converted is a soldier of Jesus Christ and he's a good soldier or he is to be a good soldier of

Jesus Christ and he's immediately put into a soldier's armor he's got battle dress on he's got the helmet of salvation the breast bit of righteousness his feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace and so on he's in the world to serve to be useful and there's nothing incompatible between godliness and usefulness they go together indeed an old writer Philip Brook says it's almost as presumptuous to think that you can do nothing as to think that you can do everything and we have both kinds in our congregations those who think they can do everything but perhaps more than that those who think they can do nothing and they do nothing because they think that way my dear friends we are soldiers of Jesus Christ and usefulness in a congregation in an area in a community is the breaking of the alabaster box appointment there's a fragrance about it that would have benefit and blessing to others and serve him while he has called today for the night comes when no man can work

[30 : 42] God has no sons or daughters who are not servants that's the third thing useful and the last thing I want to mention is this consecration and I think this is one of the strongest ingredients in the make up of the ointment within the alabaster box the alabaster box of a Christian life has one of its strongest ingredients in consecration and what a beautiful thing what a beautiful thing to be for Christ and what a beautiful thing to give to Christ a consecrated dedicated devoted life my soul my life my all someone has said this that the body has two eyes but the soul must have but one that's consecration one directed towards the

Lord or as Jonathan Edwards puts it I have given myself clean away to God that's consecration I've given myself clean away to God and we perhaps know people who are like that they are ready for heaven they are ripe for heaven it's obvious that they've given themselves clean away to God and to do that is to have a sweet fragrance of Christ as we read there in 2 Corinthians 2 a sweet fragrance of Christ the fragrance of a sweet smell acceptable to God by Jesus Christ diffusing the knowledge of Christ around and the grace of Christ around well may our lives be like that a devotedness and a consecration that is marked by fragrance the odour of a sweet smell like incense poured out may the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us and I think that that is one of the best ways not the only way but perhaps one of perhaps one of the best ways if not the best way of rendering thanks to the Lord for his benefits it's easy to say thank you it's another thing to live a life that is consecrated and useful and reverent and obedient in that way we express our thanks to the Lord and perhaps particularly in the sheer devotedness and abandonment of our lives to the Lord we give ourselves clean away to God now last night we said that we should be like Moses who esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches and the treasures in Egypt and tonight surely we should be like Mary of whom the Lord said leave her alone why are you troubling her she has done a beautiful thing to me may we go and do likewise let us pray our gracious God and our heavenly father as we think of our own hearts and lives we realize we come so far short we profess to be thine we have the alabaster box of ointment but there's not very much fragrance in it and not much fragrance coming from it Lord we pray that thou will draw near to us and through the means of grace cause us to be a blessing to others around us in our usefulness give to us obedience and reverence and that devotedness and consecration that is so needful we thank thee Lord for this incident that has been brought to our notice in the scriptures it has been put there for our use that we might think of it and that we might see its value for ourselves and our own lives and we pray that thou wilt bless our thoughts on this that we might see what Mary did and marvel at what she did how she was not willing to give anything to the Lord but the best that she could produce may we have this principle in our lives in all that we do and grant us oh Lord our God the desire to do what is beautiful and God honouring for Christ and for his cause and kingdom for as long as we're in it and this we ask for his great name's sake Amen