

A Costly Gift

Mark 14:1-11

Who here, likes surprise gifts?

Now how about costly surprise gifts in public?

It's taking a chance isn't it. There's usually a lot of planning that goes into a costly gift. And even then, you don't really know if it will be received the way you hope.

They taught me in seminary to be careful about gifts (jealousy, favoritism, leverage). I'd rather hope for the best intentions...love hopes. The group that schemed with my in-laws to surprise me with a carport...took a chance. Is Brad going to feel weird about this? Will he even like it? What are other people going to think?

Darlene and I give thanks to God for you and the love He shows through you...in its many forms. And it's ok if people find out we love each other.

This is a story about a costly and shocking surprise gift for Jesus.

How will Jesus respond?

There's a deeper question for us. How do we respond to His costly gift?

Pray: Include prayer for freedom and protection from harassment to worship.

Jesus warned His disciples what awaited Him in Jerusalem. A ransom for sin that would cost Him betrayal, and death at the hands of His

enemies...but that He would rise again.

And now He's revealed their future too. All their assumptions about the end of the age (immediate liberation and justice for Israel) have been off. There's a delay...God has more to save in this world. Persecution and dreadful days are ahead...along with deceivers who will try to take advantage of their fears and doubts. Be on guard, stand firm in faith, keep on task - expecting the Master anytime. And just when it seems no one will survive God's judgement at the end, the Son of Man: King Jesus, will appear in the sky (with the shekinah glory cloud, and the angels). And gather all the believers together with Him forever. When? Only the Father knows when the full number are saved through the Gospel. Jesus stakes His reputation on it: *heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*

Are the disciples ready for the brutal treatment Jesus is going to receive? Or the coming persecution because of Him? We'll see

What about us...are we ready?

We have a mighty advantage: the Holy Spirit.

Mark pulls back now from the training of the 12. Jews from all over have traveled to Jerusalem for the annual

Passover (14 Nissan). Each group or family has a lamb or goat sacrificed to remember the protection God gave for all who obeyed and spread lamb/goat blood on their doorposts. The death angel did not touch their firstborn. The meat for the sacrifice is shared among family and friends in homes on the Friday. Then they stay for a week-long observance of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. This includes getting rid of foods and yeast. It reminds them how quickly they had to depart from Egypt - no time for the dough to rise.

As you might imagine, the Romans prepared each year...bringing in extra troops, weapons and strategy in case of ambush or mob rebellion. Any hint of insurrection was met with an iron fist. The Sanhedrin are allowed power by the Romans to keep the people under control. But this Jesus who had risen out of nowhere had become the people's choice. He acts on a different authority.

Read Mark 14:1-2 Scheming Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin are consumed with finding a way to kill the One who could start a rebellion. The One who declared God's judgement on them. All their efforts to turn the crowds against Him had failed. He was too wise and surrounded with supporters. Their dilemma now, is catching Jesus

away from the public eye. Too risky with the city packed and tensions running high.

They fear losing power. They fear what man can do. But they should fear the One who sends His Son. They were warned what would happen if they kill the owners only son...in Jesus' parable to them in the Temple.

Jesus has said, *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Matt 10:28)

Now Mark brings us back to the activities of Jesus...enjoying a meal as a guest of Simon the Leper. This Simon is unknown to us. But we can guess He's been healed by Jesus. Perhaps he's the father to His good friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. A similar account is given by John who recalls it earlier in the week and he names those three present (Jn 12:2-8). Matthew's account is pretty much the same as Mark's (Matt 26:6-13).

V3 Extravagant Surprise

As we've discussed the social customs and attitudes toward women in the ancient near east before, I will just mention that it would be very unusual for a woman to approach the honored guest...unless serving food.

Alabaster is a fine granular variety of gypsum...white and translucent. It's used for ornamental objects like lamp bases and figurines. The one being described to us would be of calcite alabaster...a variety found as stalagmite deposits in limestone caves or in

springs of calcareous water. It was crafted in the far East as well as in Egypt. Its banded appearance is due to layers of deposits. Very limited beautiful material and very elaborate craftsmanship equals very expensive (300+ denarii). Pure nard is also expensive. It's a rose-red oil extracted from the Indian herb – spikenard.

Is it an heirloom? A trinket for the rich? Why is it designed for a one-time use?

Many families in ancient times made the sacrifices to acquire these because it was for anointing the dead...mother, father, brother, sister. In John's Gospel, we have the account of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Martha warned Jesus about having the stone rolled away from her brother's tomb? *But Lord...by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days. Jn 11:39*

Anointing a guest with oil was not unusual. But using the treasured perfume for the dead...not common at all. It would have been shocking. Some have words to express their offense right away.

V4-5 A Better Cause?

What a waste! We could have found a better cause. Caring for the poor has been valued by God since the beginning of Israel. It's right up there

with caring for widows and orphans. Guess who would be most angered? John (12:1-8) shares a similar version of the story (or perhaps this happened more than once)...earlier in the week. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus is the one pouring the perfume. Judas Iscariot is the one ranting at her in anger. John wrote that *Judas 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.* Indignation can be rooted in jealousy. Just like the disciples were indignant when James and John asked Jesus for a special place in His kingdom. (They were ticked off because they didn't think of it first) Judas was angry he had missed profits from selling this expensive perfume. All he saw was his piece of the pie vanish. He did not see the honor or personal sacrifice. He did not see the compassion. He saw a silly girl. And what about the cause of Jesus? Do they understand the sacrifice He is going to make for them? The Son of God about to be slaughtered along with all the lambs in two days. The one who will pour out His blood...for their sins. The ransom price: Jesus blood will rise as a fragrant offering all the way to heaven (Eph 5:2).

By rebuking the woman as 'wasting' her costly gift on Jesus...it's an insult to the woman and Jesus.

Jesus does not remain silent. He defends their honor and helps them see her gift as a part of the Gospel message. The Good News comes with costly sacrifice.

V6 A Beautiful Thing

Oh, rare do we find someone doing anything for Jesus. None of the twelve will be there for Him when He dies. None of them will have the courage to ask Pilot for the body to take care of. John's disciples had to get the body from Herod.

This unnamed woman broke custom; anointing Jesus with the precious perfume for the dead...supposed to be for her own family. Yet Jesus welcomes all who do the will of God as mothers, brothers and sisters. And this is the will of God. Jesus sees her shocking act...as beautiful, because He sees the heart of a devoted sister. A heart of humble obedience...to honor her Lord, no matter what the cost.

V7-8 A Worthy Cause

Rabbis taught that almsgiving for the poor was important. However, not more important than anointing the dead. The dead will not wait to decompose and smell. The poor can wait till tomorrow. That is the context. So we must not lift this passage out as a platitude for shrugging our shoulders and turning a blind eye to the poor. It's just not biblical...from God's instructions to Israel, the

prophets, Jesus and through James and the example of the early church; there is no doubt it is our duty to care for the poor. Our nation has made caring for the poor a priority and that may be one of the reasons, we have been spared more of God's judgement. Poor by choice is a different topic. There are many in circumstances beyond their reach, who find themselves in need of help just to survive.

This woman did what she could. Just like the widow who gave all at the Temple. Faith and devotion are beautiful to God.

Jesus clarifies the connection to the costly ransom He must pay. Her act of compassion fits with the circumstances of His death at the hands of the Romans. Most bodies are thrown into a common grave after crucifixion. Interesting point: Jesus' body was never fully prepared for burial...the ladies were heading back to finish the job on the third day but found the tomb empty.

A year's wages to honor the Son of Man, about to bear the sin of humanity on the cross? A most worthy cause!

V9 Jesus Honors the Giver

The harsh rebukes from the other guests are more than matched with the force of Jesus' honor. Jesus sees

this woman as a sister doing God's will, not a silly girl. She is one of the few who understands His mission...and does what she can. Very few expressed thanks and devotion to Jesus before He died. The message of the Gospel is that Jesus pours out His precious life to save those who do not deserve it. That's us.

This woman is remembered...not her name in this account, but her action: Taking what would be valuable and sentimental in this world...and using it to serve the Lord.

She demonstrates Jesus is her future.

What's an appropriate way to say thank you to God today?

We are to imitate the love of Christ who gave himself as a sacrifice (Eph 5:1-2).

And what would it look like for us to be a living sacrifice? In Romans 12, God tells us to

- Be transformed by God...His Word, His Spirit (not giving in to worldly ways) so we can follow God's will (v1-2)
- humbly and diligently work together as God's gifted servants (3-8)
- Sincerely love each other while pushing away evil in our lives (9-13)
- Live at peace with everyone...even blessing enemies (v14-21)

That's a pleasing sacrifice to God. Let us be willing to risk our reputation by our godly living, our humble service

together and our sincere love for His people and even those who would spite us. All for Jesus.

Whose approval matters most?

Someday there will be a reckoning. I want to hear Jesus say, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*" (Matt 25:23)

The first step is to repent (turn from the old way the old self) and believe Jesus as Lord and Savior (forever).

How much is too much devotion to Christ? For the ones at the meal...a little anointing oil is fine; but to break open a whole jar is a waste.

Jesus' defense of the woman and the gift – to the point where her shocking act will be a memorial...becomes the straw that breaks the camel's back for Judas. All Judas can see is earthly power and treasure...now that's a waste!

V10-11 Agent of Betrayal

It should cause any believer to pause and not take their nearness to Christ for granted. Judas was physically nearer than any of us. Yet he betrayed Christ and becomes the means for the enemy to carry out their scheming.

That's not very good Jewish calculations: money for a soul. He wasn't listening. Short term thinking leads to disaster. For who is really going to give Judas a trusted position...for being a double crosser? A Judas?

Judas was remorseful later, but he did not turn back to God in repentance.

Is Judas a warning to us?

Each one of us has a sin nature. Each of us can be tempted by our own evil desire. Temptation is not sin. But when we dwell on it, instead of denying self and turning to God for help, we get dragged away into it (Ja

1:13-15).

Evil would have us believe that when we have sinned, we are now unacceptable to God forever. And that would be correct...if not for Christ. I will not play with fire and tell you that sin is no longer a barrier. We are obligated to confess sin. (Take care of the dust of the day) For God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Turn off that path and back on the Jesus way.

Is this a warning for those called to serve the church...like elders, deacons, teachers and pastors?

Even more. Leaders can get themselves isolated. If they allow sin to take hold (unrepentant and callous), they either hate themselves and take it out on others. Or end up justifying their sin and bringing more into their deception (not on guard).

Judas became an instrument of Satan. But God knew this all along. And the betrayal was a necessary part of the

plan. God builds His church and the gates of hell cannot hold Him back.

What a contrast we have between Judas and the woman.

She seizes an opportunity to show loyalty to Jesus and makes a costly sacrifice. Judas seizes an opportunity to betray Jesus and looks to gain money by it.

Both are remembered.

Be on guard. Judas types are around. False teachers are around. False saviors are around.

But they don't know...the costly gift Jesus has given us

And we can express our thanks by living...All for Jesus