

Mark 14:1–11

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[0:00] God's word. Mark chapter 14, verse 1.

It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of unleavened bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him. For they said, not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly.

And she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii and given to the poor.

And they scolded her. But Jesus said, leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you.

[1:07] And whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for burial.

And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her. Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priest in order to betray him to them.

And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he saw an opportunity to betray him. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be. You may be seated.

Well, good morning. So good to have you here as we continue in our time in the gospel of Mark. I want to take as my verse from this text, verse 9.

I think what I want to look at this morning is the truth of Jesus' words actually fulfilled again this morning in our hearing that wherever the gospel goes, the generosity of this unnamed woman flows.

[2:37] The unnamed woman stands as an example for generations of Christians. I'm kind of glad that she's unnamed here.

Some of you might be able to fill in your own as a consequence of modeling your life on her example. The generations of the church, as the gospel has gone out, have looked to her both as an example, but as a measuring rod under which we ourselves are marked.

Wherever the gospel goes, generosity flows. And the depth to which the gospel goes within us, so too the generosity flows from us.

She's unnamed. I think of a largely unknown man today, John Thornton.

John Thornton was born in the year 1720. He had a wealthy home. His father directed the Bank of England.

[3:52] Probably had his own account early. He would make his fortune largely from that which he had inherited, some 25 million, and multiply it time and time over in the business of exports and imports.

When Thornton, though, was 34 years of age, certainly we have some here today in their mid-30s, he heard the gospel from a very unknown preacher by the name of Henry Venn.

That is, he heard that forgiveness of sins could be obtained through the death of Jesus for all who placed their faith in him.

And Thornton was thoroughly converted. In other words, the gospel now was going. And immediately what happened was generosity began flowing.

Thornton would become the second wealthiest man in England in his day. Personally, he funded no fewer than 11 churches.

[5:07] He actually studied London itself, comprised of 97 parishes, and lamented that there were not sufficient ministers of the gospel to be proclaimed in each one.

Thornton would one day walk into a church service at Bank Station. If you've ever been to London, you come out of Bank Station, you are at the financial center of what was the center of the world of that day.

And he heard a preacher by the name of John Newton. John Newton had been a slave trader, horrifically giving his life to the oppression of others.

And yet when he heard the gospel, that is the good news, that forgiveness of sins can be obtained through the death of Christ, who stands as a substitute for us, for all who have faith, Newton believed.

Thornton was so enamored with John Newton, who you might know through the hymn Amazing Grace, that he funded that ministry for Newton to stay in the financial center of the city at 200 pounds a year.

[6:25] Basically, 50 grand a year going to keep Newton in the financial center so that the gospel could be heard. You see, where the gospel is going, all of a sudden generosity begins flowing.

And for 20 years, we know of Newton because of the largely unknown man named John Thorne. However, let's be honest. Not everyone stands in the line of the unnamed woman in our text or the largely unknown men and women that we could recount here this morning.

Not everyone places a valuation on the death of Jesus that would call for extravagance in giving, which Mark has made clear in the way he's organized the material.

I hope you caught it. The woman itself, herself, stands in the middle of the text that was read. But she doesn't stand alone.

[7:39] On either side of her are various persons, a cast of characters, where the gospel is not going and generosity is not flowing.

Take a look for yourself. Verses 1 and 2, this bookend, as it were, that makes the woman's testimony extraordinary. You have the chief priests and the scribes seeking to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

Now, ironically, I think John actually points out that they are at this fever pitch, having rejected both the man and his message two days before Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

If you're not a reader of the Bible, the irony might be lost on you. These men are looking to celebrate how God redeemed Israel through the sacrifice of a lamb while getting ready themselves to kill Jesus, whose sacrifice would open up salvation to the world.

They had rejected him. They had been threatened by his authority and opted instead for their own autonomy.

[9:04] Oh, don't miss it. Those people, even today, stand on one side of the woman. Men and women who hear the message of Jesus, namely that forgiveness of sins can be obtained before God through his substitutionary death on your behalf as you place your faith in him and not yourself, and they reject it.

Why? Because that would mean that they have to now give their lives to his authority and men and women the world over, and even some in our midst this morning say, I am opting for autonomy.

On the other side of the woman, verses 10 and 11, we have Judas. Now this is one who does not reject Jesus because he's been a threat to their authority.

This is one who is going to betray Jesus because he has a disdain for his priority. Now I know there's a little bit of rhythm to the language there.

It was intended. Betrayal of Judas is out of a disdain for his priority. Let me just explain. In chapter 1, Jesus had come and was doing wonderful things for the poor, for the sick, for those in need and distressed, for the oppressed.

[10:40] And the disciples came to him and said, you've got to hang out here because these needs still need to be met. And Jesus said at the opening of the gospel, we've got to keep moving because my priority is the preaching of the forgiveness of sins and the coming of the kingdom.

And I've got to get that out. Now, Judas wanted a different kind of savior. He wanted a here and now Jesus, not a then and then Jesus.

He wanted a Jesus that met my needs here without having to think about my actual, deeper, spiritual need before God. Namely, that of forgiveness of sins.

these two then stand on either side of Jesus. I've been thinking about Judas as a contemporary leaning into what's happening with some when they talk about the deconstruction of your faith. Have you heard that? People are deconstructing. They've been around Jesus. They've grown up in the environments in which Jesus is proclaimed.

[12:01] They perhaps have attended churches and committed themselves maybe even membership or leadership to the ministry of Jesus but at some point along the line they come to disdain the priority of Jesus.

And so, Judas, it says here, looked for money. Now, the gospel of Mark doesn't indicate it but the later gospel writers fill in the blanks.

Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. That's the valuation from the Old Testament that you would put on a slave who had been gored by somebody else's ox.

Now, Judas is saying that's the valuation I'm going to place on him. Or the high priest were saying I'll give you that much.

A disdain for his priority. Now, let's take a look at the woman. I mean, these two things on either end shouldn't be the centerpiece of the sermon.

[13:16] They're standing on either side of her so that we'd look at her. So let's slow down for a moment. Let's ask a few questions on the unnamed woman in verses three through nine.

First of all, where does this kind of generosity come from? I want to make a note on women in the text that is worth mentioning.

And then third, I want to talk about what this generosity looks like. So where does this incalculable extravagance placed upon Jesus' death come from?

Well, we have to move from the temple and Caiaphas' house in one and two of chapter 14 to Bethany, he writes, which is about two miles outside down the Kidron Valley and across from Jerusalem.

It says that Jesus is that time at the house of Simon the leper. Now, there's some consideration through other Gospels and material that Simon was perhaps the father of Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

[14:37] In fact, in other Gospel accounts, it seems very clear that one of these sisters is involved in this act. That this unnamed woman has actually seen through the miraculous work of Christ, the healing of a leper, perhaps the raising of a brother, God.

And in seeing the resurrection and the life that's in Christ, has come to believe that you are the Christ, the promised one, and your miracles have vindicated that you are the man, and your message about forgiveness is true.

That's where it comes from. That's where this kind of extravagance comes from. It comes from someone who says, I know who I am before God, and I've paused long enough in silence to consider my sin, and I am looking to him, that is Jesus, to stand before the Father and advocate on my account.

Nothing in my hands am I bringing, nothing to the goodness of my life am I clinging, but to the cross alone. I'm looking for life and purpose in living.

That's where it comes from. She had come to believe his message. Mark opened this gospel, the beginning of the gospel, same word that Jesus uses here, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in our verse nine, the gospel simply means the good news.

[16:25] The good news simply means that the kingdom of God has come, forgiveness of sins is available, and Jesus is the one through whom you get it. She believed it.

She believed the message, and she also believed that that forgiveness was associated with his death. She's aware this night in that home in Bethany that the death of Christ is a necessary fulfillment fulfillment of all the promises for a rightful substitute to be had.

And so you could find her on this night to be fully devoted to his ministry. ministry. It's worth noting that this unnamed woman bookends in a larger literary unit all the things Jesus has been trying to get his disciples to understand about his death.

It wasn't long ago that we were in a text, if you can turn it back, to the widow's offering, chapter 12, verse 41.

It's worth noting that these two women, get it, these two women see when everyone else's eyes are not yet perceiving.

[17:59] That the widow, in fact, get it this way, this woman's, in our text, extravagance is only outmatched by the widow's complete dependence.

The widow gave more than the unnamed woman of our text because the widow put in two pennies and this one, the text says very clearly and I love it, she did what she could.

But these two women are like rising in the gospel of Mark. As examples, the widow, total dependence on God.

The unnamed woman here, total devotion to God. And in between, the death of Christ, which brings us to God.

So let's slow down then, having seen where her generosity comes from, personal experience with Jesus and his message, seeing that God has opened the eyes of this woman as he did the widow, let's look at the act of her generosity.

[19:13] What does it look like? I mean, it ought to be read in slow motion. Verse 3, And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.

Can you see it? this alabaster jar, this soft mineral stone found largely in areas like Egypt, which were then quarried and blocks brought out and copper like straws burrowing down through the soft stone to create a cavity and then the sculpturing of it and the careful carving of it until you have a beautiful translucent fragile container for medicines for perfumes.

I mean they found a bunch of these in King Tut's deal. It wasn't uncommon. She had one. now she goes and gets it and she comes and it says she broke it.

It also says it was very costly. We learn later that it's worth not 30 pieces of silver, a couple months wages, but it's worth 300 denarii, a full year's salary.

What do you make a year? full year's salary? I think she comes like this.

[21:24] That's a little imaginative. My hallelujah belongs to you. Cracks, breaks, flows.

my hallelujah belongs to you. A year's salary. You deserve it.

And it flows and it fills and the house is now aromatic with the voluntary offering of a woman who says the death of Christ is worth all the glory, all the honor, all the praise, all that I have and I want to lavish it out in an act of extravagance.

You know, the word gospel, I told you in English it means good news. In Greek it simply looks like euangelion.

I've been thinking about this woman and the euangelion and its relationship to our extravagance.

[22:50] How much do we value the gospel? What price do we put on what he's done for us? See, this is so much better, isn't it?

You're waiting for me to talk to you about giving and generosity. The text is all about generosity and the gospel. But here we have the treasured text.

It's not motivated by guilt. It's not never motivated by guilt. It's motivated by the generosity of Christ who, although rich becomes poor, that those of us who are poor might be made rich.

And just as we are merciful to others, it is rooted in the mercy that he has shown. And just as we learn to be generous with others, it is rooted wonderfully in the joyful privilege of understanding the generosity that he has had toward us.

And so she comes, she pours it out, Jesus says, she gets it. She's connecting my message, my death, as God's greatest gift for her.

[24:19] Now, of course, those that were there thought that this was inappropriate. It could have been used for other purposes, and indeed it could have been used for other purposes.

In fact, there's nothing here in this text where Jesus is denigrating or alleviating our obligation to the poor. I mean, the word of God is clear.

The righteous people, the righteous person, is giving to the poor. That obligation is there, but what Jesus is saying is, this is a unique moment and her gift is a unique gift and it ought to be treasured. She shouldn't be scolded for this. She is providing an example for all of us to consider. She is, by her act, giving us a life by which our own can be measured.

And so, I just want to ask as we think about it today in regard to ourselves, so how's it going with you? How's it going?

[25:32] How you doing? You don't want to be these sentinels rising in Mark's text on either side of the unnamed woman.

You don't want to be the one that says, ah, I've heard about him and he's a threat to my authority and so I will live a life of my own autonomy.

No, you don't want to be there. You don't want to be Judas. You don't want to go, ah, I have a disdain for his priority and I'm ready to walk out of all the things I've heard and I'll do it on the cheap too.

I'd give up Christianity for less than a Ben Franklin on a bill. No, you don't want to be there. You want to actually sit here this morning and put your eyes on the woman in the middle.

How is she an example for you to consider? How does she provide a rod by which your own generosity can be marked? What valuation do I place on the death of Christ?

[26 : 52] What does it tell me about what I think about the good news? Mark tells us that she did what she could.

Am I doing what I can? you know, this church has benefited and continues to benefit greatly from the generosity of his saints.

Some who are here this morning in our midst, and others like the John Thorntons of the world who maybe perhaps I know some who have never even stepped inside, but they value the message that's proclaimed from this pulpit, namely that your sins can be forgiven through the substitutionary death of Christ as you place your faith in him alone for salvation.

salvation. And that message is worth all the money in the world for what does it profit a man or woman to gain the world, but to forfeit their own soul.

And there are souls in our city, in our country, and around the globe that stand momentarily in the shadow of death, wherein the expiration date will come for a proper response to the life and death of Jesus.

[28 : 35] What's it worth? What's it worth? Not by guilt, but by understanding what he's done.

Let me encourage all of us, myself, my own family, you, your family, what does a lifetime of gospel generosity look like?

Let me give you another example from history. Selena Hastings, again, not unnamed, but largely unknown. Selena Hastings, like John Thornton, lived in the 18th century.

She's known as the Countess of Huntington. I don't know how you become a countess. I think she became one through somebody she married. She heard the gospel when she was 20.

A lot of people here right now around the age of 20. that's when she heard the gospel. She heard it even listening to a young 22-year-old preacher by the name of George Whitefield.

[30 : 00] Now, you might not know Whitefield, but Whitefield crossed the sea seven times over and is largely responsible for what historians look at in a period of church history called the Great Awakening in our country where people began to realize I have a need before God that only Jesus meets.

And Whitefield while preaching would often weep and people began to you know like they do with me sometimes what's the over and under on how long it takes home to get a tear in his eye.

and Whitefield would say I weep for you because some of you won't weep for yourselves. So his preaching would go forth that forgiveness is here in Christ.

The generosity of God is before us in the death of Christ. And Whitefield awakens the soul of the country into a dependence and devotion on God.

Well this woman Selina Hastings at the age of 20 hears him a couple years later believes in his gospel.

[31 : 21] There's a biography that this is what it says about her before Jesus. You ready? Just like many 20 year olds here today I'm sure. Since her earliest days Lady Huntington had lived an exemplary life remaining aloof from the coarse pleasures of high society conducting herself in a highly virtuous and religious manner.

In turn she rested in the insurance that her personal righteousness was sufficient for the saving of her soul. But that personal righteousness to save her soul had actually been shaken under the hearing that no matter how righteous you are you can't walk your way into the presence of an absolutely righteous and holy God.

And then she got sick and she thought she was going to die and she felt the unworthiness of her self-trust heart. And then the writer says, from her bed she lifted up her heart to God for pardon and mercy through the blood of his son with streaming eyes she cast herself on her savior and immediately the scales fell, doubt and distress vanished, joy and peace filled her.

now, this young 22 year old woman now, would go on to live a life of extraordinary generosity. She is actually responsible for funding the ministry of George Whitefield. This woman built from the ground up numerous chapels and church buildings as the primary funder.

[33:13] This woman, beautiful woman, funded the founding of the seminary. By the time she passed, they say that she had given away more than half of her stuff, she had a lot evidently because the equivalent today would have been over 150 million dollars.

See, this is the deal. Where the gospel goes, there's generosity flows, not from guilt, but because we recognize what he's given.

So, how goes it with you? How goes it with me? We have so many examples. I could name examples.

Gospel generosity. You know, a lot of times when you do buildings, they put names on, right? Have you seen this? you're on the university campus and you walk into the, you know, any of the business school, they're probably a plaque, you know, your name's on there because you gave.

Well, here we have an unnamed woman, and I've mentioned two very little-known individuals, but in God's economy, he knows all of the names that have been so touched by his work that they've given their lives to generosity.

[34:39] Let me just say, there is no lack of opportunity in this day and age for gospel generosity.

There's no lack of work that needs to be done. There's no lack of gospel budgets that need to be balanced. there's no lack of debt that needs to be declared.

There's no lack of churches that need to be built. There's no lack of churches that need to be planted. There's no lack of ministers that need to be funded.

There's no lack of global ministry partners that depend on your generosity. There is no lack. there's no greater privilege than to follow the example of the unnamed woman.

There's no greater glory than to stand under the measuring rod of her mark to know how I'm doing.

There's no greater honor than to give what we can, to do what we can.

[36:02] I just want to do what I can because he has done all for me. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this unnamed woman.

Total devotion. we thank you for the widow, total dependence. We thank you for many over the centuries that have followed their lead.

May we enter their train and be found like them after reflecting on the greatness of your gift to us in Christ.

we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.