

Beautiful Things

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- [0:00] Welcome to the third lesson on beauty, art, and the gospel. Today's class is entitled Beautiful Things. There's a handout on the table there if you haven't gotten one.
- We'll learn today that Mark 14 offers us a lesson on beauty. There are two things that I'd like to point out about Mark 14 today.
- First, God uses beautiful things to correct our mistaken perceptions. And second, beautiful things point to the death of Jesus.
- Can someone please read from either your Bible or the handout, the passage from Mark 14. And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and it poured 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.
- [1:13] 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, 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. 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.
- So again, there are two things that I'd like to point out about this passage. This morning, God uses beautiful things to correct our mistaken perceptions.
- And beautiful things point to the death of Jesus. Before we explore how God uses beautiful things to correct our mistaken perceptions, what does it mean to perceive?
- As usual, the Oxford English Dictionary gives us a few definitions. Two are here important for understanding how God uses beautiful things to correct our mistaken perceptions.
- [2:19] Firstly, perception as an awareness of a thing or person through the senses. Secondly, spiritual understanding. So we'll look first at the first definition.
- We'll focus in this lesson on two types of perceptions that occur in the story. The perceptions of Jesus and the rest of the guests first. So in one way, the perceptions of Jesus and the other guests in the home of Simon the leper overlap.
- In the first way that I've offered from the dictionary. And in another way, they diverge. In the second definition, spiritual understanding. So first, the overlap.
- The guests and Jesus are equally aware of each other. In Matthew, in his recounting, he specifies that the guests include disciples.
- Mark does not identify the guests. Even though he doesn't name disciples among them, it is possible that there were disciples at the home of Simon the leper. And most importantly for today's lesson, both Jesus and the disciples perceive a woman, likely an uninvited guest, who brings a package into the home of Simon the leper.

[3:40] So what was this package that the uninvited guest brings into the home of Simon the leper? In the terms of Mark, verse 3, an alabaster flask of ointment, a pure nard, very costly.

The Greek term for the alabaster flask is one word, alabastron. As the name suggests, it was typically made of alabaster, a soft rock used for carving and typically white.

This type of vessel was for perfume. The choice of the word ointment in the passage on your handout does not necessarily mean that the woman carried something that was not perfume.

Rather, the term ointment reflects the thickness of ancient perfumes, which were oil-based, as opposed to the thinner alcohol-based perfumes of today. So perfumes or aromatic oils at the time of Jesus were ointment-like in their consistency.

This blue alabastron is, yeah, so we have a few examples here. They're from the eastern Mediterranean, from around the time when the woman would have visited Jesus in the home of Simon the leper.

[4:57] So projected here is one from the museum in Israel from the first century after the birth of Christ. It is likely that tools were used to create the onyx-like pattern that you see on it in yellow.

It's a bit hard to see. Sorry about that. It is about six by one and a half inches. We also have another example. It's blue, and it has bands that get tighter as the vessel tapers inward, and it has handles unlike the previous one.

And then we also have one with a very long neck. Again, short, but the longest of the three. This one is from the first century to the hundredth year after Christ, so it may have been used while Jesus was being anointed in Bethany.

It is the longest of the three. Yeah, narrow neck. So these kinds of vessels became more widely accessible with a glass-blowing technique from the first century after Christ.

This technique involves liquefying glass and blowing it into various shapes. Glass-blowing allowed for greater and less expensive production during the time of the story in Mark 14.

[6:13] So while the flask, or in its Greek, the alabastron, that the woman breaks and pours over the head of Jesus was likely not very expensive, the perfume inside the vessel was.

It had been extracted from the spikenard plant. So notably, the woman at the home of Simon the leper does not intend to preserve any of the expensive perfume that she has reserved for Jesus.

Usually because so little was used at a time, people used animal skin and elements from the stem of a plant to cap the bottle, but this was not the case for the woman who Jesus and the other guests both perceive.

Both Jesus and the guests indeed see the woman enter the house of Simon the leper, hear the shards of the flask fall to the ground, and smell the perfume that will linger in the house and on Jesus' body beyond that evening.

And yet, while both Jesus and the guests are aware of the woman's actions through their senses, they have different spiritual understandings of what has occurred. This refers to the second definition of perception, which I put up earlier.

[7:24] So we're going from sensory awareness of the woman, seeing the woman approach Jesus, hearing the flask break, smelling the perfume as she pours it over his head, to the different understandings that Jesus and the other guests have of the woman's actions.

Let's begin with a guess. The guests count the cost of the perfume. They put its worth at 300 denarii. A denarius a day was the average earning of an agricultural worker.

So the guests perceive that the perfume would have been around a year's worth of work. In order to better understand the guest's perceptions or understandings of the woman, let's look at the Greek term that gets translated as waste in the passage from Mark.

Apoleia. In the New Testament, this term refers to someone who does not last into eternity. What will be destroyed? What will perish? While the guests accuse the woman of wasting the perfume and not wasting herself, it is possible that their expressed perceptions carried undertones of condemnation, but it isn't certain.

In his teachings in the book of Matthew, Jesus uses the term Apoleia in contrast to life. Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

[9:03] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. In Jesus' long prayer to the Father in John 17, Jesus expresses his care of the disciples and says that only one, the son of destruction, has been lost.

So Judas, known for his theft and betrayal of Jesus to the chief priest, is characterized by Apoleia. And the word Apoleia is also used in relationship to Judas in the book of Acts.

And the term also gets repeated later in Acts when the former magician Simon tries to bribe Peter to give him power to grant others the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands.

Peter rebukes Simon, may your silver perish with you, he exclaims, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. In Romans, Paul uses the metaphor of the vessel to write how some are destined for mercy and some are destined for destruction or Apoleia.

So the word Apoleia in Matthew, John, Acts and Romans is used in reference to the idea of people who do not live eternally with God. Again, while the guest accused the woman of wasting the perfume and not herself, it is possible that their expressed perceptions carried undertones of condemnation.

[10:22] So if you haven't read the Mark passage, feel free to read it on the handout and take a few minutes individually to place yourself in the shoes of a guest.

How would you perceive the uninvited presence of the woman, the breaking of the flask, and the pouring of the expensive perfume on Jesus' head? So feel free to just take a few minutes individually to think about that and to put your...

like, oh, like, oh, I should have... How are you feeling about this? Smile, like a comfy face. Something.

Especially if I'm... Yeah, I think I would just say that I'm just going to talk to him right away. But I think that I'm thinking about it. Yeah, I don't know if I'm wondering. I mean, what's part of this?

One of the things I've learned is like, oh, we should have seen. What is going forward? Well, also there's someone who's trying to prove himself righteous. Yeah, I would wonder if I can see that.

[11:31] Although the disciples certainly have a precedent for misunderstanding. I'm just in this reading situation. You know, to declare love with force.

Which, you know, the apostles, the men around him, they didn't do that, but she did.

Which I thought was pretty amazing. Yeah. Especially at that time. In our groups, we were talking about how it's hard to, like, to not think about how Jesus perceives her when we're thinking about how we're perceiving her.

So we're, like, trying to align ourselves or disalign ourselves from that a bit for a second. And Ben mentioned that a modern corollary of the situation could be driving in your car and, like, someone or a woman stops and asks to come into it.

And, like, this awkward situation of, like, this car is demanded right now to be a hospitable space to this stranger. And she might do something in this.

[12:56] Like, what's going to happen? I thought that was helpful. All right. So to Jesus' perceptions. What does he say?

He says, leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you. 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. So another translation, in a few other translations, the beautiful thing gets translated as good deed.

So the guests perceive waste in the woman's uninvited presence. Breaking of the flask of perfume and use of the expensive perfume for Jesus' head. Jesus, however, corrects their perceptions.

When Jesus says that the woman has done a beautiful thing or good deed to him, he corrects the concept for them. These concepts would have been informed by proverbs like, Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.

[14:08] Jesus does not deny this. Whenever you want, he says, you can do good for them. But he also adds that those present will not always have him.

He points again to his death when he says that the woman has prepared his body for burial. A good deed, says Jesus, includes consideration of his death.

We see this also in Mark 2, where people are confused by the fact that Jesus' disciples do not fast. Jesus responds that while he is present with them in the way that he was in the Gospels, it is not time to fast, but to feast.

When he is taken away, when he dies, then it will be time to fast. So the goodness of fasting and feasting here are related to, should be considered in light of Jesus' death.

So now that we have seen how God uses the actions of the woman to correct the conception of beauty and goodness of those present at the home of Simon the leper, and how the beauty of the woman's gift gives testimony to the death of Jesus, we will explore the element of head anointing included in this gift.

[15:26] This element of anointing on the head may have had undertones of both kingship and death. Interestingly, this head anointing in Mark reminds us that this is not a scene that has captured the imaginations of many artists who deal with the topic of an unexpected act of reverence towards Jesus by a woman.

Such artists were likely more inspired by narratives in Luke, in which a sinful woman wets the feet of Jesus with her tears, wipes them with her head, kisses his feet, and anoints Jesus' feet with oil.

Mary and John likewise anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair. These narratives seem to have inspired paintings by the early Netherlandish painter, Derk Boots, who was influenced, for those of you who are familiar with the art historical canon, Jan van Eyck from the 14th century.

These narratives of reverential women in John and Luke may be also inspired a drawing created with pen and brown ink by Venetian painter Paolo Veronese.

Here are Jesus and a woman who grasps his ankle. They form part of a crowd of more than 25 figures, not including those peering down from the balcony.

[16:49] So they're kind of, oh, sorry, that's not very clear. They're not very prominent in the picture. And then on your left, this narrative also seems to be the source for French painter Pierre Soubliera, with a more identifiable representation of Jesus.

And another Frenchman from the 19th century depicts this act of reverence from a woman who washes the feet of Jesus. James Tissot, who painted in London.

And then, again, washing the feet of Jesus. Sochi Wontanabe, who used to be an artist in residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center on Prospect Street.

And then from Bulgaria, Julia Stankova, who pays attention to the hair also of the woman in Jesus' feet. So these images, they intersect with the story from Mark, but they also diverge from it.

One of the main divergences is that the woman anoints the head of Jesus. This is important because an anointing of the head with oil had specific connotations.

[18:06] Stories from the Old Testament suggest that an anointing of the head with oil, specifically olive oil, was reserved for kings. So the prophet Samuel anoints King Saul with oil, and someone whom Elisha appoints anoints King Jehu with oil.

The Lord also instructed that high priests be anointed on the head with oil. So it is possible that Jesus understands the woman's breaking of an alabastron and anointing of his head with oil as a sign of her knowledge of him.

Jesus is to be honored, and he would also have to die. So while the woman seems to have understood this reality of his death through her actions that prepare Jesus for burial, the guests who consider them wasteful likely did not.

Indeed, a Messiah that would have had to die on a cross was contrary to Jewish expectations of a Messiah. So scripture bears witness to the difficulty of grasping a suffering God.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul labels the crucified Christ a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles. Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would be a rock of stumbling, a trap, a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

[19:32] The Jewish character in Celsus, a work from the early Christian writer, Origin of Alexandria, grapples with the difficulty of Jesus, Jesus' divinity and his suffering on the cross.

The disciples themselves and those who surround Jesus at the time of his death also demonstrate their resistance to understanding how the Messiah would have to die. They, like the guests at the home of Simon the leper, also reject the beautiful knowledge of the woman with the alabaster jar.

So this is why Jesus had to keep reminding them throughout Mark of his death. Could someone read Mark 8, 31-33? He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan, he said. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

Thank you, Lydia. And then Ben, Mark 9, 30-32. They went on from there and passed through Galilee, and he did not want anyone to know. For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him.

[20:58] And when he is killed, after three days he will rise. But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. Mark 10, 32-34.

Matt, would you be able to read that? Sure. And they were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed him were afraid.

And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes.

And they will condemn him to death, and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him, and spit on him, and flog him, and kill him.

And after three days he will rise. Alright, so the main points that Mark 14 offers us on beauty.

[21 : 56] God uses beautiful things to correct our mistaken perceptions, and beautiful things point to the death of Jesus. So for a few minutes, I'd like you to reflect individually on how the woman in Mark points to the death of Jesus.

Once you're done doing that, you can ask yourself, Has anything recently reminded you of Jesus' death? If you're having a hard time, you can think to Mark 14.

You can also think to a sermon from a few weeks ago on Luke 21, when we learned about a poor widow who puts two copper coins into the offering box of the temple.

She gives out of her poverty everything she had to live on. This kind of sacrifice points to the death of Jesus, who laid down not only his money, but his life fully for us.

So have you witnessed any similar acts of sacrifice or generosity recently? You can just begin by meditating on this story, and then think about reminders in your own life.

[23 : 06] She said, that was just an' shell as a gift of reason.

The book bears■turned on her daughter whose bringing her formal The Bi■ on her own. So that when we chose her endorsement of the schoolulating Jesus, she also ■■■ed.

That's it. EAST is not going to be an unattainful toy .