

# A Tale of Two Dinners: Perfume

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 11 March 2015

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[ 0 : 00 ] We're beginning this Wednesday lunchtime a short series in Mark's Gospel as we approach Easter. We're spending our time in Mark chapter 14 and as we do so over these four weeks we will be preparing in a sense for Jesus' death.

And we start our studies this week and next with a tale of two meals, two dinners. The first meal is a meal at Simon the Leper's house and then next week we will look at the Passover meal together. So today we are in verses 1 to 11 of Mark chapter 14 which is on page 850 in the church Bibles there. Mark chapter 14 verses 1 to 11. So do turn there with me now and we'll read that together. Mark chapter 14 starting at 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 pulled it over his head.

[ 1 : 31 ] There were some who said to themselves indignantly, Why was this 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, and whenever you want you can go 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 priests in order to betray him to them.

[ 2 : 36 ] And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. Amen.

Well, let's pray together before we think about these words together. Let's pray to our Heavenly Father. Our Heavenly Father, we give you praise for who you are, the creator and sustainer of all things.

You alone are God. You alone are worthy of our praise. So help us, Father, to praise and honor you as we gather together. Help us to listen to your words.

Help us to respond in obedience to you. For we see in your words your great work of salvation for sinful human beings like us. Your great work of salvation through Jesus Christ, your Son.

Amen. So would you help us now. Teach us. Change us so that we might live lives that shine before others.

[ 3 : 47 ] So that others would see our good works and give glory to you, our Father. And we pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Now, we live in a society that doesn't like to talk about death very much.

It's just not the sort of thing you mention in polite conversation over a coffee, is it? Think about the last biography you read. It's very unusual for the death of that person to get more than a passing mention somewhere at the end of the book.

But yet, when you read the accounts of Jesus' life, like we are here in Mark's Gospel, they seem almost obsessed with his death.

It's very unusual indeed. A huge amount of time and space is given over to the events leading up to and surrounding Jesus' death. And we'll be considering the run-up, the few days before Jesus'

death over these next few Wednesday lunchtimes, over these next four weeks.

[ 5 : 02 ] And here at the start of chapter 14, we see a passage which is really all about the upcoming death of Jesus. And in particular, the value placed on Jesus and his death by two individuals, the woman who isn't named and Judas.

By this point in Mark's Gospel, the tension is ramping up. The rumblings from the authorities wanting to deal with Jesus have been there almost from the very start.

Back in chapter 3, we see the Pharisees plotting, along with the Herodians, to see how they could destroy Jesus. And now, as we enter the Passover festival, the whole pace of Mark's story really slows down.

Several chapters are dedicated to just a few days that week. And as you'll see, if you read on through Mark's Gospel, Jesus doesn't make it to the end of the Passover festival.

He's crucified before the week is out. But his death lies heavy over these verses. Just look at verse 1.

[ 6 : 18 ] Right at the start here, we see the chief priests, the scribes. They were seeking how to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. Now look to the end of our section, verse 10.

Judas, one of the 12, went to the chief priests in order to betray him. And it was that betrayal that led pretty swiftly to Jesus' arrest, his trial, his crucifixion.

Jesus' death lies thick in the air. It's there at the start of our passage. It's there at the end. And it's there right bang in the middle too. Just look down at verse 8.

To be anointed, to be set apart, is to be chosen for a specific task.

And particularly in the Old Testament, it is God's chosen king who is anointed. Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ.

[ 7 : 25 ] And here, his anointing is closely linked with his death. Jesus, God's chosen king, is to die. And that is shocking.

That is astonishing. But this is what Jesus has been saying all along. Right from the start, he has made it clear he would suffer. He would die. That was his purpose.

And the disciples had heard that said over and over, but they hadn't really understood. Jesus, God's anointed king, suffering, dying.

Well, those things just didn't go together in their thinking. And yet here, Jesus makes the connection explicit. He is God's chosen king, and he must die.

And it is the contrasting attitudes to the suffering king that we see loud and clear right at the heart of this passage. Two alternatives.

[ 8 : 23 ] Two characters. The woman and Judas. Both give up something in relation to his death. The woman gave up something of immense value for Jesus.

Judas was willing to give up Jesus himself. To betray him in order to further himself. And it was his actions, his betrayal, that led to Jesus' death.

Both value Jesus, but for completely different reasons and motivations. One was genuine adoration. And the other, to be frank, was evil.

So let's look first at the woman. And we see a woman who is willing to give up a most valuable possession for Jesus.

Verses 3 to 9. Look at what the woman does here. She comes to Simon's house, and she has brought with her this alabaster flask of enormous value.

[ 9 : 26 ] This wasn't some impulsive decision. She deliberately brought this flask with her in order to do what she does with Jesus. And what she does is to break this flask and pour out the entire contents on Jesus' head.

It was an ointment of pure nard. And that's some sort of oil extract, probably from India or something like that. And the value was extraordinary.

We see in verse 5 that it was valued at more than 300 denarii. Now that sounds impressive. But one earth is a denarii. Well, hold on to your hats.

One denarii was an average day's wage for a labourer. So this flask of nard was worth at least the wages of 300 days' labour.

To put it in modern terms, taking the UK average wage, that's about £22,000. One little flask of ointment. That is astonishing.

[ 10 : 31 ] Now you're probably thinking what everyone there was thinking. What on earth did you do that for? What a waste. £22,000. That's a deposit for a house.

That's a very nice new car. Well, that's very much the response of those who were there at the time. Although they dressed it up in much more spiritual-sounding language.

Look down at verse 4. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, Why was this ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii, given to the poor.

And they scolded her. Their reaction belies their hardness of heart, perhaps. Some of them had already determined to have Jesus killed.

But I suppose if you just take her actions on a human level, that's probably the right conclusion to come to, isn't it? That was a lot of money poured away in one go.

[11:30] And for what? It could have been put to better use, surely. What was the point? Well, we don't need to wonder at the point of it, because Jesus tells us, verse 6, 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. To the astonishment of those watching, Jesus rebukes them and commends the women for her actions. He doesn't rebuke them for their desire to look after the poor. In fact, he affirms the rightness of looking after the poor. He says, you can do so whenever you want. The thing they fail to do was appreciate the uniqueness of Jesus being with them.

The woman recognized that Jesus wouldn't always be around. And Jesus calls her actions beautiful. He commends her for what she did.

[12:39] Why does Jesus call them beautiful? Everyone else there thought it was a waste. Well, the key is there in verse 8.

Here is the interpretation that matters. She has anointed Jesus' body beforehand for burial. Right at the heart of her actions, right at the heart of this passage, is Jesus' upcoming death.

The fact that Jesus is aware of his upcoming death is not a surprise to us if we read through Mark's Gospel. On three occasions in chapters 8, 9, and 10, Jesus has predicted his death.

And here again, his death is front and center of the action. Her actions, says Jesus, were not a waste because her actions pointed to his death.

And his death is inextricably linked up with Gospel proclamation. Look at verse 9. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of me.

[13:50] And true enough, here we are, millennia later, remembering the actions of this woman. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, this anointing for burial will be proclaimed.

Her extravagant actions were not a waste because Jesus' death is front and center of the Gospel. His death is of extraordinary value because his death makes forgiveness of sin possible.

The woman could have poured out a flask of double the value and still Jesus would have commended her. She saw something of who Jesus was and she gave what she could for him. She understood that Jesus was worthy of this extravagance. Now isn't that a challenge for our thinking about Jesus and about his death?

You and I have the benefit of knowing far more about Jesus than this woman did. We have the benefit of the rest of the New Testament, which tells us of the enormous significance of Jesus and his death.

[15:02] And even knowing what I know, I often feel fairly ambivalent towards Jesus' death. I don't know if you find that as well. I'm often more excited about Christmas than Easter.

There is something almost shameful about Jesus dying on a cross, isn't there? Don't you sometimes feel ashamed of the cross? It looks weak.

It's defeat. But we are to value what doesn't look valuable at all, and it's his death. Because his death, weak as it looks, is good news for sinful people.

And I suppose the value that you place on his death depends very much on how you see and understand the human condition. Mark has already set out in the Gospel the desperate situation of mankind without forgiveness that Christ offers.

It is only through his death that man has the hope of forgiveness. If you get the desperateness of the human condition without Christ, you get the value of the cross.

[16:15] How can we be unmoved by the death of Jesus Christ when we see what it achieves? He died to save sinners.

Jesus' death is extraordinarily valuable. And this woman knew it. And Mark wants you to know it as well. His death is something of such immense value that there can be no action that expresses adoration to Jesus that is too extravagant.

Actions that the world, actions that the religious establishments look at and scoff. Extravagant giving that builds the next generation of Christian witness.

perhaps through enabling the training of young men and women to pass on God's word faithfully. Perhaps through sacrificial giving to enable your church to build premises that enable Gospel work to go on.

That looks like an extravagant waste to the non-Christian world who looks on and scoffs. But Jesus is worthy of your devotion.

[ 17 : 24 ] But on a more day-to-day basis, isn't devotion expressed in simple obedience to Jesus? Jesus says, those who love me obey my words.

We value Jesus and his death by hearing his words and doing them. And doing them with an ungrudging joy. Because we value the hugeness of what he has done for us through his death. I wonder if you and I might need to ask ourselves to ask one another, how is your devotion to Jesus in light of his death?

In light of what he has done? This woman held nothing back. Her extravagant, wholehearted devotion was scoffed at that Jesus commended her.

So there's a woman who is willing to give up something of extraordinary value for Jesus. But secondly, Judas, he valued Jesus too, but in a radically different way.

[ 18 : 36 ] Judas was willing to give up Jesus for a few pieces of silver. Look again at the last couple of verses of our section. Then, Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him.

And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. The fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth words of verse nine. Send something of a shiver down the spine, don't they? Who was one of the twelve. Mark is careful in his account to make it crystal clear that the betrayer, Judas, was one of the twelve.

Look at verse 18, a bit further on in chapter 14. Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me. Verse 20, it is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me.

And then look on to verse 43, the moment of betrayal. Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve.

[ 20 : 02 ] Judas was willing to give something up too. He was willing to give up Jesus. Judas, and he did it for a bit of money. Jesus' death proved profitable for Judas in the short term.

But heed the warning that Mark wants us to heed. Three times, Mark draws our attention to the fact that Judas was one of the twelve. He had lived with Jesus.

He ate with him, traveled with him, heard his words, saw his miracles. Proximity to Jesus guaranteed nothing.

Judas, despite all that he heard, all that he saw, remained hardened, and he was even willing to betray Jesus. He saw Jesus as a way to advance himself, to make a profit, to get into the good books with the religious establishment.

What do you really make of Jesus, his death? Is it just something to profit from?

[ 21 : 12 ] Is Christianity, is the church you're part of, is that just a vehicle for your own advancement, your own gain, your own reputation?

As one writer put it, Judas was one of those religious people who sees that their interest in Christ lies more in what he can do to further their goals rather than in what he wants to do to change their lives.

It's possible to know a lot about Jesus, about his death, about the gospel, and yet not really know him, to not really value him truly.

Don't be like Judas. Don't value Jesus, the church, for what you can get out of it in the short term. Don't see the church as a vehicle for your own reputation or even financial gain.

Heed the salutary warning of Judas. two responses then to the death of Jesus. One is hostility, opposition, selfish gain, and the other sees the beauty and the value of what Jesus and his death achieved, and it responds in adoration, holding nothing back.

[ 22 : 44 ] So be like that woman. There can be nothing too valuable in light of the real significance of his death for people like you and I.

Nothing too valuable to withhold from Jesus. In light of eternity, that woman's 22,000 pound flask of ointment barely registers. What can you give for Jesus Christ who died for you?

What can you give for his church? The woman gave what she could and she was commended. It was not wasted. And what you can give, not what you can't, but what you can, will not be wasted. And wouldn't it be wonderful if younger generations looking up to you saw something of this woman's extravagant adoration adoration for Jesus in your life, in your obedience to Jesus, in your service for him.

Let me pray before we close. Heavenly Father, to know you, there can be no greater thing.

[ 24 : 04 ] you have given us a priceless gift through your death. You have bought for us forgiveness for our sin that we might be the children of God.

There can be nothing that we can give that would be too extravagant to express our adoration.

So we thank you for all that you have given us in Jesus. Help us to respond with adoration and love for our Savior.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.