

'The Human Heart Exposed'

Mark 14:1-11

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Introduction

Good morning. I'd like to start by getting you to think about the most expensive thing you own. This is not a moment to boast. It's most likely your house, but if not your house, is it a car, a really big TV or maybe a musical instrument? Tori and I worked out her saxophone was about double the price of her old car. But maybe that says more about the state of the car.

Well for Mr Whetstra it *was* a car, a new light blue Volkswagen. You might recognise this as Brother Andrew's car but before it was Andrew's car it was Mr Whetstra's. One day Andrew calls him up to say, 'I'm going behind the Iron Curtain to be a missionary!' to which Mr Whetstra replied 'You'd better come get your keys'. This leads to one of my favourite quotes of the whole book, Andrew asks 'What about your business?' 'Our business?' Mr Whetstra spoke scornfully, 'Andrew, you are on the King's business!'

You may feel that this story has exposed you slightly. You might be thinking "I couldn't give up a car I just bought." Well, we're going to dive straight into that thought this morning. We're going to be looking at another extravagant act of love for the King that will keep exposing our hearts. We're in Mark 14:1-11. I'm going to start by unpacking this rich, little story, pun intended. Then I have one possible objection to deal with before we deal with our hearts. So, let's dive in...

Unpacking the story

This story has a really painful start. The first people we meet are the infamous chief priests and teachers of the law. And what are they doing? They are scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. These men are supposed to be the Godly standard, men who follow the rules, men who do good but here they are deliberately and deceitfully planning the death of an innocent man.

I would love to say that Mark has artistically embellished their villainy, but they condemn themselves with their own words. 'Not during the festival or the people may riot.' The festivals in question are the Passover and the festival of unleavened bread over the following week. These celebrations are a reminder of the first Passover back in Exodus 11 and 12 which led to the freedom of the Jewish nation from slavery in Egypt, and the population of Jerusalem would grow from about 50,000 to a few hundred thousand! A few hundred thousand excitable people at that, you can imagine Jewish nationalism is at fever pitch as they remember their freedom. So, the priests need to commit their wicked acts now before the festivals start in two days or they will have to wait till afterwards.

And their concern over a riot isn't as sincere as you may hope it would be. We must remember that Jerusalem is under Roman occupation. They are not just simply concerned about the dangers of a riot, but that they will lose the privileges given to them by the Romans if they disturb the peace.

What a damning couple of verses.

We then side-track over to Bethany, a small village less than 2 miles away from Jerusalem, where Jesus is reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, presumably for a meal.

Jesus is not avoiding the priests. He has already ridden into Jerusalem in chapter 11, and he is now hanging around the outskirts. Jesus knows exactly what awaits him in Jerusalem, but he doesn't hide away or avoid it. Instead, we find him where he usually is, eating with outcasts or those who were once outcasts. Simon the Leper has quite an unfortunate nickname as he clearly no longer has leprosy. But maybe this is a sign that his social standing has not recovered. Jesus doesn't mind one bit.

And it is here, in Simon's house, that we meet an amazing woman. We don't know who she is, all we know is what she did. The first thing we read about her is that she arrives with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume. We're given three clues as to how expensive this perfume really is. V5 tells us it is worth more than a year's wages. That's the big one. We're also told it is made of Nard. Nard is the name of a plant that produced an aromatic oil, and we know historically it was very expensive. Thirdly, it is pure nard. It isn't mixed and diluted. This is the proper stuff, very very expensive.

I'd love to know what the dinner guests are thinking as she enters the room. Maybe she's going to use the perfume to make the room smell nicer. Ancient Israel with the heat, sweat and open sewers was not a particularly pleasant-smelling place. Maybe she's here to dab a bit of perfume on someone's forehead, to anoint them as the honoured guest at this meal, as was custom. Maybe it's an offering for the poor. This was a custom at Passover. Maybe she's bringing it to the disciples to hand out as part of their ministry. We aren't told that the disciples are there but, seeing as Judas is mentioned and they all arrived with Jesus in Jerusalem, it's safe to assume they are there also.

That's not what she was there for though, if they had guessed she was there to anoint someone, they would be correct. But she doesn't dab a small amount as would be normal, she *pours* the perfume over Jesus' head. The average yearly salary today is about £30k, can you imagine a perfume worth £30k being given up in its entirety? A single drop may cost £100 or more but she doesn't even save that. This woman takes the most expensive thing she owns and gives it all up, every single drop, without any desire to get any of it back.

And it makes you think, why? What is the purpose? Well, we have two very strong ideas about why.

As I mentioned before, it was common to anoint an honoured guests at feasts. This woman could simply be anointing Jesus as the honoured guest in a grand way with her expensive perfume. But honoured guests were not the only people to be anointed. The most notable examples are kings, priests, and dead bodies. All of which Jesus would become. We don't know if this woman had all of that in mind when she anointed him, but she clearly thought he was worthy of the year's wages.

And that leads us to the second reason. This is undoubtedly more than just an anointing of an honoured guest; this is an extravagant act of love towards Jesus. She hasn't just dabbed some cheap perfume on his forehead, she's poured the entirety of an extremely expensive perfume over his head. This jar of perfume could also have even been an heirloom. It was quite common for jars of expensive perfume to be passed down through the family for a special occasion like a wedding.

Imagine your family owns a 10-carat diamond engagement ring, we're talking millions of pounds here. It has been passed down through your family for generations and generations. It comes to you, and you decide to give it away. What would your family think? This woman continues to give her all to honour Jesus.

For such an act of love, we can assume with assurance that this woman must have experienced Jesus' unconditional love for herself and just wanted to express her love in return. 1 John 4:10 and 19 say, 'This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.' 'We love because he first loved us.'

Acts of love like this continue to this day, let me make a couple of modern comparisons. Would you take young children to the middle east right now, to a dangerous place without knowing the language or the culture? Our mission friends Mark and Natalie Toews have, to advance the kingdom of God in a predominantly Muslim culture. It doesn't make logical sense unless you want to return the extravagant love of Christ with an extravagant act of your own love.

What about Steve Saint? I have a picture here of him. Steve's father, Nate, was martyred on a missionary trip to a Waodani village in Ecuador. The man standing next to Steve is called Mincaye, a dear friend of Steve's and also one of the men who killed his father. What forgiveness! it doesn't make logical sense unless you want to return the extravagant love of Christ with an extravagant act of your own love.

Back in Bethany, we get three very different reactions to this woman's extravagant act of love.

The first is that of those present at the meal. This is likely to be the disciples, as I said before, but we're not told that. We do know though that these people should be amiable to Jesus. Simon and Judas are named, and whoever is present is willing to be in the same house as him, even recline with him. This room should know who Jesus is and they may have even spent time following his ministry. You would think that their reaction would be kind-hearted and spiritually minded but instead, they indignantly say to one another "Why this waste of perfume?" At first, I was sympathetic to this group. If you saw someone giving £30k to anyone, it would be easy to think 'wow you could have kept some of that...' Then I read this quote. 'Waste implies giving more than is due for something of little value.' 'Waste implies giving more than is due for something of little value.' This group is implying that Jesus is not as valuable as the perfume. Really? You are standing in the company of the Son of God. He is at the end of his ministry. You have likely seen or at least heard of him feeding thousands and raising the dead to life, and more importantly of the gospel that you are forgiven of your sins. And you say that he is not worth £30k?

I will let them off slightly when they say it could be given to the poor because it was a custom at the Passover but that just makes this woman's love even more extravagant! She didn't just go against logic, she didn't just go against her family (if it was an heirloom), she also went against her culture to honour Jesus. I will let them off slightly but not completely. They are thinking far too practically minded and nowhere near spiritually-minded enough.

Jesus, on the other hand, loves it. The first response is indignation, the second is appreciation. 'She has done a beautiful thing to me... She did what she could.' Only Jesus sees this act as it truly is, the beauty of her love, that she did what she could. So, he rightly rebukes them for their harsh rebuke.

He then continues, 'She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.' If you had any doubts that Jesus knew of his impending sacrifice, I feel this is a pretty obvious clue that he knows. We don't know if this was the intention of the woman when she anointed Jesus, but if she knew the love of Christ then maybe she made the connection to the Old Testament prophecy in

Isaiah 53: 'But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.'

Whether Jesus sees this act as more than was intended or not, he grabs this opportunity to prophesy his death, to highlight that the love this woman is reciprocating will be made complete in his sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus concludes his rebuke of the dinner guests saying, 'wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her'. Well, we're still talking about her 2000 years later, and similar stories are recorded in 3 of the 4 gospels. But more importantly, what she has done will be told alongside the gospel because she is a shining example of gospel fruit, unlike the indignation of the guests.

This story starts painfully and ends painfully. The final response is Judas' betrayal. We aren't told here why this particular interaction leads Judas to betray Jesus, but we know how Judas feels about money. Maybe he does believe this act was a "waste", he doesn't value Jesus more than that amount of money. Jesus isn't the purely practical figure Judas wants him to be. So, he cashes in, for 30 pieces of silver, about 4 months' wages.

It's interesting here that the priests change their plans. Originally, they were careful and cautious in their evil, but when Judas presents them with an opportunity, they pounced at the chance and are now waiting. And we know they take that opportunity, not before, not after, but bang in the middle of the festival. Another great quote, 'Mark frames this story between the account of the treachery of the religious leaders and the treachery of Judas, accenting two diametrically opposed responses to Jesus. Those from whom we might naturally expect the most... turn out to be the perpetrators of the worst evil.'

Objection

Before we take a look at our hearts, you may have noticed that I skipped over verse 7. I did that because I think it's important enough to be addressed separately. 'The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.' From the moment this verse was read out, you may have been thinking, 'hang on a second, how on earth can Jesus say this. It's outrageous! How can he say he is more important than helping the poor?' And that's the core of it. If I or Roy or Brendan were to say this, it would be utterly outrageous and ridiculous. But this isn't just anyone. This is Jesus. And Jesus is God. His divinity is a massive part of this story. Jesus can only say this because he is God and only because he is God can he be worthy of devotion above helping the poor. Like Roy said a few weeks ago, we don't preach politics because it is more important to preach the gospel. I could dive into why Jesus says, 'the poor you will always have with you,' I could preach about helping the poor, or I could preach that Jesus is the Son of God. The Son of God who died for my sinfulness and your sinfulness, who brings this great gospel news that says we are equally dead in sin but equally saved by Christ so go treat others that way. Go care for the poor, treat them with the selflessness and generosity that you are shown by Christ.

It is only right for Jesus to say this. We cannot say this – if someone wanted to honour Roy or I for a good sermon with an 8k flat-screen TV, whilst flattering, it wouldn't be right for us to accept. We are all just servants. In our case, the TV could go to the poor. Any money should instead honour God by growing the church, going to the poor, or advancing the kingdom of God in another way. We should stop people honouring us but point them to honour God. Which, in essence, is what Jesus does. The

guests didn't see his divinity so he had to remind them that he is not a human being that wouldn't be worth the devotion, he is, in fact, God.

Application

I think we can say without a shadow of a doubt that this story is all about the heart. Three people, or groups of people, expose the state of their hearts across this story, and their hearts open up our own. So, the big question we have to answer is: what is the state of our hearts? What is the state of your heart, here this morning?

There isn't a black and white, yes/no answer to this question. Our hearts are complex, and this story reveals a whole scale that our hearts could sit on, from the evil of the priests to the indifference of the dinner guests to the extravagance of the woman.

So, where do our hearts sit on the scale?

Do you have an evil heart?

Now I don't think, and I would hope, that none of us have the murder of an innocent man on our hearts. But that isn't the only sin of the priests. They deceitfully schemed, delighted in betrayal and took their opportunity thoughtlessly. They reveal their hearts to be full of evil. We may not be full of evil, but we are sinful creatures.

In Romans 1, Paul describes the sinfulness of humanity:

'They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.'

The priests tick a lot of these boxes and I'm sure we do too. We may not be murderers; we might not invent new ways of doing evil but are we envious? Do we gossip? Do we approve of those who practise evil? I'm sure you have all heard about the situation at the Oscars. If you haven't, after Chris Rock makes a joke about Will Smith's wife, Will Smith slaps him and swears at him. What astounded me from the fallout of the event was the number of people online defending both men. They tried to justify their actions. They approved of the joke or the violence or the language. We are called to not approve of any evil, no matter the reason. The priests probably thought they were justified.

Though the priests do take it a step further and delight in sin. Are there sins we delight in? Do we enjoy seeking and spreading gossip? Do we enjoy boasting? Do we enjoy slandering others?

Let's take the priest's poor example as a warning that an evil heart is not as far away as we might think, and that a "good" life is not a guarantee of a good heart.

Do you have an indifferent heart?

This is specifically for those who follow Christ this morning. The guests decided that Jesus wasn't worth a year's wages. They were happy to recline with him and enjoy his presence, but he wasn't

worth more than that. Can we be like them? Can we become indifferent to following Jesus because we are comfortable where we are?

I think this is a particular problem for Christians in the west because we have very easy lives. I don't mean to diminish anyone's struggles by saying that, we will all experience hardship, but we don't have bullets flying past our windows, or bombs going off nearby. We almost certainly won't experience a lack of food or water or clothes. It's very easy to fall into a pattern of going to church every week, maybe home group as well, and getting away with being a good Christian. You don't do anything majorly wrong; you live a respectful and earnest Christian life but also a comfortable one. We are not called to be comfortable. Jesus said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'

Jesus also said, 'For where your treasure is, there your *heart* will be also.' To take up our cross daily we have to work out where our treasure is. The guests were not as fully devoted to Jesus as they thought they were. Judas' treasure was clearly money. What comforts do we treasure above Jesus that stops us from fully devoting ourselves to him like the woman? It could be our money, maybe it's our time or our families, it could be our effort or our rest. What does the way you live your life say about how much you value Jesus? Is he your treasure?

I guess the indifferent could also be the indignant heart depending on how you respond to the life Jesus calls you to. When you hear "give away £30k", do you brush it aside indifferently, or do you indignantly harden your heart against it?

Do you have an extravagant heart?

Remember earlier I asked you to think about what the most expensive thing you own is? Could you give it up for Jesus? Could you give your car to a missionary in need? If you have spare rooms, could you let people stay with you? Could you downgrade your expensive TV and give the difference to someone in need? This woman takes the most expensive thing she owns and holds not a single drop of it back, and Jesus calls this act 'beautiful'. This is yet another demanding rebuke to our easy-going western discipleship!

We have so much! Yet, how often do we count the cost, rather than 'doing what we can'? Remember the widow's offering? Rich people threw in lots of money, but the widow threw in her last two coins and Jesus said, 'this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.' The value of extravagance is not just monetary, it's comparative to what you have. The extravagant heart doesn't give £30k if it earns £500k, it gives more than that.

It doesn't have to be financial. Could we give more of our time? Do we consider our time as our most precious commodity? I know there are a couple of church rota spots that need filling, 3D are looking for more leaders, and we'd love to grow our Connect team. Maybe it's our effort we value most. "I can't come to church or home group this week because I'm too tired, I don't have the effort." Have you ever avoided following Christ because it was too much work?

These questions, about our money, time, and effort, are really important to consider because our actions are diagnostic of our hearts. We may feel like we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, but if we don't do anything about it then we are not extravagant hearted, we are not fully devoted to him. 1 John 3:16-18 says,

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

That's quite a high bar, that might seem like an insurmountable challenge, but it isn't, we can be as extravagant as the woman in this story but to do so we have to grasp Christ's love. We can only have extravagant hearts of love if we understand and experience the extravagant love of Christ for us. The love that forgives every sin you've ever committed and every sin that you will commit. The love that took him through torture at Roman hands and then to the agonizing cross to die as an atoning sacrifice for our sin. The love that moulds and shapes us into a new creation despite our weakness and our failings. We need to be crying out Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:

'I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.'

I remember reading a Tim Keller book where he recalls a conversation he had with a lady who had just become a Christian, she said, 'Jesus gave his life for me, how can I give anything less than my life back to him.'

Close

If the worship team would like to come up, we are going to sing one last time, we're going to sing 'my heart is filled with thankfulness to him who bore my pain, who plumbed the depths of my disgrace and gave me life again. Who crushed my curse of sinfulness and clothed me with His light' And it finishes with these great words 'every day I have on earth is given by the king. So, I will give my life, my all, to love and follow him.'

Let's pray,

Heavenly Father, I pray that we will be rooted and established in love, grant us the power to fully grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. That we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Father, may you give us extravagant hearts like the woman, to not hold anything back from you. Amen.