

The alabaster jar

There is a story told in Mark 14 about a woman with an expensive alabaster jar of perfume, who broke it and poured it on Jesus' head. At the time, the Passover was just two days away (which became the day of His death) and the chief priests and teachers of the law were trying to find a way to kill Jesus. They said, *"We don't want to do it during the feast or the people may riot."* It's hard to comprehend spiritual leaders actually trying to kill Jesus, but this is the way it was. Empty religion can be very cruel.

The story continues:

"While he was in Bethany reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the leper, a woman came in with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume made of pure nard.

She broke the jar and poured the perfume on His head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor, and they rebuked her harshly.

Leave her alone, said Jesus. Why are you bothering her? For she has done a beautiful thing to Me. The poor you always have with you and you can help them anytime you want, but you will not always have Me.

She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will always be told in memory of her."

I don't think there is any other incident about which Jesus said, *"Wherever the gospel is spread this shall be spoken of..."*. It must have been very significant to Him. What seems to make it even more significant is that it happened more than once!

In John 12 you will notice the story of a similar incident, one that happened four days earlier than the incident in Mark 14. John 12:1 says it occurred six days before Passover. (not two, as in Mark 14:1.) It happened in the same town of Bethany, but in a different house. Instead of Simon's house, it occurred in the house where Lazarus and Mary and Martha lived.

"Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served while Lazarus was among those reclining at table with Him. Then Mary took a pint of pure nard..." Notice that in the other story it doesn't say it was Mary, but here it was Mary. It's a different house, a different day.

"Mary took a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet, wiped His feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected, why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.

He 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.

Leave her alone, Jesus replied. It was intended she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You always have the poor among you but you don't always have Me."

In the Mark 14 account, when the woman poured out her vial of perfume on the head of Jesus, she met a surprising resistance. She had put herself in a vulnerable position. Who was in the house? As far as I can see, it was the friends of Jesus who were in the house. Some of those present replied with indignation, *"Why this waste of perfume?"* As far as we know there weren't any enemies of Jesus in there. It was probably His own disciples who expressed this indignation!

Did they know what was going on when this lady broke the jar and poured the perfume on His head? Well, they thought they knew. They said, *"This is a waste."* Here was a bottle of perfume worth a whole year's wages. Put its value into whatever your year's wages are: that is how much it was worth. Would you pour out a year of your income on Jesus? It brought an immediate response in the room. *"Why was this perfume wasted, when it should have been sold and the money used for the poor?"*

Let's say it was \$20,000 worth of perfume in American wages for a year. Someone just poured out \$20,000. You could sell that jar of perfume, get \$20,000, and how many homeless people could you feed? If you were in India you could feed an awful lot of people with \$20,000. You could start many churches in Russia with \$20,000. You could support many, many pastors for a year in most third world countries on that amount. There could be hundreds, maybe thousands of people saved with an investment of that \$20,000 from this one bottle of perfume which the lady brought and broke...and wasted.

I always think that this question wasn't quite complete. Those who spoke left a couple of words unsaid, which complete the question, "Why was this perfume wasted....?". The unsaid, but understood words were "...on Jesus". "Why was this perfume wasted ...on Jesus?" Isn't that what they were saying?

It was as if they were saying, "Think of all the poor people out there. All the things that need to happen, and here we are wasting \$20,000 of valuable perfume on Jesus. He doesn't need anything. Why waste anything on Him? Let's go out and do something good. This is not good. Why, this was a waste. Pouring out that perfume on Jesus was not right!"

Yet Jesus, the lover of the poor, said, "*Let her alone...she has done a good thing to Me....*"

What was happening in that house? The woman was displaying her love for Jesus. She loved Him so much that she wanted to honor Him as best as she knew how. (Anointing someone out of respect was common in her culture.) She no doubt gave the very best she had... to Him. It was pure worship. It was pure honor to the One that had perhaps forgiven her or healed her.

Pure worship can only come out of a heart that loves the Lord and is not being coerced out of fear or guilt. She could have thought, "I better worship the Lord. I better go find something I can give. She probably wouldn't have come up with a \$20,000 perfume bottle if she had been motivated by anything but pure love for Him. She probably would have found something worth \$2.50 — because it was something she HAD to do. But when she did what she did, the atmosphere of overflowing adoration and honor for Jesus must have filled the house just like the fragrance of the perfume!. A spirit of self-righteous indignation immediately rose up in those around her. "What a waste! Get out there and do something good! There is so much out there to do! Why waste this wealth on Jesus?"

There is an insight into what was in the hearts of those who said this. In the John 12 account, in the other house, four days earlier, a similar thing happened. In that case, it wasn't several people who rose up with indignation. It was Judas. It wasn't that he was concerned about the poor. Actually, he liked to pilfer the money. He was a thief.

Here is the insight. If you are going to worship and honor the Lord, if you are going to take time to pour out your soul in love to Him, the voice of a thief - a betrayer - is liable to stop you. And he will do it, not by leading you into outright sin, but *by distracting you* with the urgency of other good things. That voice will tell you that taking a lot of time in worship, devoting much energy and attention on the Lord, is a waste of time.

A life of fellowship with God, of honor and worship to Jesus, does not come cheap. It costs something -- your best. The best of your time, your energy, and your attention. There is a price to pay to have a life of fellowship with God.

The voice of the betrayer will rob you of your life of closeness to God. This voice comes mainly in your own private thoughts. This enemy is closer than you think, because the thief is not in somebody else's flesh, it's in your own flesh. As you kneel down to pray, the voice says, "I don't have time for this". "I have too much work to do." As you attempt to meditate on the Word, or just to sing to the Lord, the pressure of life – the tyranny of urgent matters – steals you away from God Himself.

Do you know how to "waste" the perfume of your time, your honor and your attention — on Jesus? Have you learned to resist the voice of the thief, the voices of all the urgent matters that keep you from having any time for pouring out your love and admiration on Jesus Himself? If not, you are more loyal to other things and other people that you are loyal to Jesus.

One day I was meditating about a life of worship and prayer. I had a vision of a river and saw a dam being built in the river. The Lord asked me in my heart, "What is that dam for?" I thought about it and said, "Well, it stops the flow of the water". "What else is it for?", the Lord said to me. "Well, it raises up the level of the water and creates a reservoir behind it." "What else?", He said. "Well, when the water is raised up it can go over the dam and it can create *power*." He said to me, "That is like prayer. The river is the flow of the activity of your life. Prayer must interrupt the flow of your life. You will never, by just rushing down with the river of your activity, get a prayer life. Prayer interrupts the flow of your activity. Prayer is like that dam. It temporarily interrupts the flow of your life, and creates a reservoir of life within you. In prayer the level of your inner life comes higher and nearer to Me, so that the flow of your activity will be on a higher plane, with more power."

We must find the courage to interrupt what is going on in our life, even if it is good, and build a dam of worship and prayer. God wants to raise us up to a higher level of faith and hope, create a reservoir of His presence within us, and create a higher level of spiritual power that can be harnessed for the work of His kingdom. The woman with the alabaster vial interrupted everything to pour her perfume on Jesus.

To honor the Lord is to pour on Jesus the best that we have, and with it comes a breaking. An alabaster vial was broken, so the perfume could come out. In our case, something has to break inside of us -- mainly our pride and self-righteousness. All that we were, all that we are, all that we ever hope to be, must be laid at His feet. Then our worship can be released: a pure love for the Lord, a fragrant aroma to Him and to all those who get near us. Without such a brokenness we will be doomed to a life of powerless religion, trying hard to stay busy doing good things, but not enjoying any fellowship with the Lord. We need a life humbly lived in the presence of the Lord Himself. We need to pour on Him -- without embarrassment -- our worship and honor, unconcerned about the reaction of those around us, and undistracted by the pressures of life around us. We need a life devoted to Jesus Himself.

“Lord, help us to follow the example of these ladies who loved You so much, who poured out something of great value to honor and worship you. Help us to ignore the voices within and without that would keep us from living lives of worship and prayer. Help us to be as those alabaster vials of perfume, broken and poured out for You, Jesus. May our lives be a fragrance of honoring Your Presence that fills the air around us and draws others to come closer to You..”

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