

# LOVE'S EXTRAVAGANCE

by Ray C. Stedman

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In our series of studies in the gospel of Mark, we have come to the fourteenth chapter. As you recall, Mark is bringing us to those eventful moments of the last week our Lord spent in Jerusalem and its environs just before his crucifixion and resurrection. In this chapter, Mark does what he has done frequently throughout this Gospel -- Mark brings together certain events and themes which occurred at various times during this week and deliberately places them side by side so that we might see the contrast in certain emphases. Like an artist, he draws together two lines of truth, taking that line of thought which centers around hate, and that which centers around love, and braiding them together. In Verses 1 and 2 you have Mark's account of the hatred of the priests toward Jesus, followed by the story of the love toward him of Mary of Bethany. Then in Verses 10 and 11 you come to the story of Judas' mounting hatred and enmity against Jesus, followed by the story of Jesus' love for his disciples, as exhibited at their last Passover together, and the mingling together of these two themes in the disclosure by Jesus of the betrayal of Judas at the table of the Lord.

Let us open with the words which set forth the hatred of the priests:

**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 a tumult of the people." {Mark 14:1-2 RSV}**

These priests are aware, as Mark makes known here, that time is growing short, that if they are going to act, they must act now. The days of the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread are at hand. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that at these Passover feasts there were sometimes as many as three million people in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages, pilgrims from all parts of the earth. The Passover could be celebrated only in Jerusalem, so the city was thronged with strangers from various parts of the world. The chief priests and scribes know that if they take Jesus at the height of the feast, they are apt to incite a riot; so they want to act beforehand. As there are only two days left, there is a deep sense of urgency about their malevolent threat. This is always characteristic of hatred. Hatred can never wait. Hatred must act as soon as an opportunity affords.

Mark makes clear, too, that these priests were motivated by a sense of threat to their own position. Why did they want to kill Jesus? Because his system of teaching and his whole style of living was a threat to them. They were trying to pose as God's men, religious men, men whose interests and concerns were to relieve the distress and suffering of others. But when Jesus taught, he exposed them, cut through their hypocrisy and showed what liars they were. This threatened them, so they were out to get him.

Mark shows us also that there is a deep sense of secrecy on their part. They have to move by stealth, have to take him in secrecy. This also is always characteristic of hatred. Hatred moves behind the scenes, does not come out into the open if it can help it.

In sharp contrast to this, Mark gives us the account of what took place in Bethany. It actually took place a few days before this, for John tells us it was six days before the Passover. Mark is simply recounting it, not in chronological order, but as something he sets in contrast with the hatred of the priests. It is the story of the love of Mary of Bethany:

**And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard, vary costly, and she broke the jar and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her. But Jesus said, "Let 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 will, you can do**

**good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." {Mark 14:3-9 RSV}**

Here we have a wonderful account of the love of this woman. Mark does not give her name, but John tells us it was Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who seized this occasion to anoint the head of Jesus. There are three movements in this brief account.

The first is the act of loving sacrifice. You can picture it in your imagination: Mary coming into the room with the jar of expensive ointment as Jesus is reclining on the couch. John tells us that she anointed both his head and his feet, which were both easily accessible to her as he lay, oriental fashion, on the couch beside the table. She breaks the jar and pours the whole contents upon his head and feet, anointing him. It is a beautiful act, one which captures the attention of all those present.

And, second, it awakened a response. Mark tells us the first response was one of indignation that she should waste this ointment so. John says it was Judas who raised this objection. This is characteristic of Judas -- that he was concerned only about the waste of money. John says he was a thief. He had been appointed treasurer for the disciples -- not because he was a thief, but because he was good at money. Nevertheless he became a thief as a result. There are always people who try to place a monetary value on things. They seem to know the price of everything, but the value of nothing. In this account, Jesus is warning us of the foolishness of that attitude, for if you look at the world only in terms of dollars and cents, you are going to miss three-quarters of life. This is what he wants to teach us here.

Now, third, our Lord takes this beautiful incident and shows us the true value of it. He says five things about it which mark it an extremely valuable act.

1. First he says, "She has done a beautiful thing to me." The beauty of it lay in its very extravagance. This woman did not spare any of the ointment but broke the flask and poured the whole quantity out upon him. Now, it was costly ointment. Judas, with his practical, computer mind, reckoned it up as worth three hundred denarii. A denarius was the day's wage for a laborer. In these inflated times, three hundred days' wages would be a tremendous sum -- probably at least \$10,000. But in those days, a denarius was worth about 20 cents, so that would make this ointment worth approximately \$60.00 -- almost a year's wages. In the eyes of Judas, this woman wasted an enormous amount of money when she poured out the ointment upon Jesus. It was such a lavish act, and therein lay the beauty of it. Jesus said, "That's beautiful! She hasn't held anything back, but has simply poured it all out. It's a beautiful thing she has done to me."
2. Second, he said that it was a timely thing she had done. "It was something that could only be done now. Anytime you want to do good to the poor you can, because they are always around." And it is right to help the poor. But there are opportunities which come in our life which must be seized at the moment; they never happen again. Mary had sensed this and had seized the moment to do this which could only have been done then, for such a time would never occur again. It was out of the sensitivity of her heart that she realized that the timing was right, and Jesus recognized this.
3. Then, she did that which was feasible. That is, she did what she could. It was all that was open to her. She could not fix him a meal; there was no time for that. She could not make a garment for him; there was no time for that. There was nothing else she could do to show her love but this, and so this is what she did. She did what she could. I like that. I am sure our Lord has called our attention to it because it is so practical for us. Someone has said, "I'm only a man, but I am a man. I can't do everything, but I can do something. And what I can do I ought to do. And what I ought to do, I'm available to do."

This is really the attitude the Lord asks of all of us. You cannot do everything. You cannot feed the starving world, but you can feed one person. You cannot comfort all the lonely hearts on earth, but you can comfort one or two. And Mary did what she could. Everywhere in Scripture, this is all God

asks of us -- that we bring him what is at hand. Some of you think that you live dull lives, and that you never have an opportunity for real service. But you do! This is what this story tells us. You have something that you can do today. And in doing it with the expectation that God will take it and enlarge it, you will find that tremendous results can follow. We are to bring our loaves and fishes -- a simple little meal -- and Jesus will feed the multitude. We must fill the jars with water, but he will turn it into wine. When we do what we can, with this expectation that God will use it, what a beautiful expression it is!

4. The fourth element of this act was that it was insightful. Our Lord says, "She has anointed my body beforehand for burying." It is interesting to go through the Gospel accounts and note the many times Jesus said to these disciples that he was going to die. Over and over again he informed them that he was heading for death. Not one of them believed him -- except Mary of Bethany. She believed him, and understood that he was here for that very purpose. This was what motivated her. She understood that he was heading for burial. And just as love would long to do some act of service for him since she could not be sure she would ever have the opportunity later to find his body and anoint it for burial in the Jewish custom, she did it now. I think it is clear from this account that Jesus knew she did this deliberately for that very purpose. What a comfort this must have been to our Lord! Of all these friends who were around him at this time, only this one had the sensitivity of heart to understand what was happening. There is nothing more comforting to us than to be understood in what we are trying to do. How she must have ministered to him by this understanding act!
5. Finally, what she did was deserving of being remembered. It was memorable. Jesus said, "The story of this beautiful act will be told in memory of her wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world." Here we are today, 2000 years later, fulfilling this very word, telling again of the act of Mary of Bethany, when she anointed our Lord's head and feet. Those elements constitute what Jesus called, "the beautiful thing she has done to me."

Immediately in contrast to that is the hatred of Judas:

**Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it they were glad, and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. {Mark 14:10-11 RSV}**

This is probably one of the saddest portions of the record of Judas, this shabby moment when he went to the high priests deliberately intending to find an occasion to betray the Lord. There are some scholars today who try to excuse Judas. They say that he was merely misled. He expected Christ to usher in the Kingdom, and had this program in view for him. And since Jesus did not act in line with that, Judas was simply trying to force his hand. And though he was mistaken, nevertheless he was not evil-intentioned. But this account refutes that. He went deliberately to the high priests -- took the initiative -- with the intention of betraying his Lord. Mark highlights it with these words; "he was one of the twelve." He was of the inner circle, the ones upon whom Jesus leaned and depended, and yet he went to betray his Lord.

He did it, Mark says, because of greed and covetousness. Here again is that sense of urgency which hatred always exhibits. It has got to be done quickly. And because it is evil, it has to be done in secret as well. He went in secret. motivated by a deep sense of greed. If we put all the gospel accounts together we can see that he had a little scheme of his own. He had been stealing from the treasury in order to purchase for himself a piece of land that would be his when he came into the Kingdom. He needed a little more money, just thirty pieces of silver, and it was for that he bargained with the priests in order to complete his purchase. So it was nothing but common, ordinary greed that drove Judas to this act of betrayal. He went deliberately, coldly, intending to work it out that way.

Once again, now, Mark brings in the thread of the theme of love. In this closing account of this section, he shows us the love of Jesus as he brings about this last Passover feast.

Again there are three movements; first, the preparation for the Passover, beginning in Verse 12:

**And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the passover?" And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a large jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the householder, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the passover. {Mark 14:12-16 RSV}**

Again, just as in the case of the arrangements regarding the donkey he rode into Jerusalem, I do not think we need to read anything miraculous into this signal Jesus gave his disciples as to how to find the upper room. These both were prearranged, preparations he had worked out in advance. But there is significance in them, because he deliberately planned that this should be the signal. He said, "When you go into the city, you will find a man carrying a jar of water." Now, that would stand out (like a man today carrying a purse on his arm), for this was woman's work. Only women carried jars of water on their heads. A man might consent to carry a skin of water, but not a jar. Jars belonged to women. They had their divisions of labor in those days, just as we have today. And I suppose the Women's Libbers were just as upset about it then as they are today. He told them, "You won't have any difficulty, because you will find a man carrying a jar of water; follow him." And they found it to be just as he said.

Why did he use this symbol? I cannot read this without being convinced that our Lord arranged it this way because he wanted to say something by it. God's symbols always have meaning, if we know how to understand and read them. Here is something he is saying to them, and we do not need even to guess at it. The Scriptures tell us what this symbol meant:

There is another feast of the Jews which centers around the carrying of a jar of water by a man. It is referred to in John's gospel. In the seventh chapter of John, Jesus stood up at that feast and said to the whole crowd, "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water,'" {John 7:37-38 RSV}. I think this is what he is saying here to his disciples: "Where we are going you don't understand. Although some of the symbolism of this feast of the passover lamb is known to you, there are other elements of it that you do not know. But follow me, and out of your hearts shall flow rivers of living water."

Then we come to the second movement, the upper room itself:

**And when it was evening he came with the twelve. And as they were at table eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread in the same dish with me. For the Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." {Mark 14:17-21 RSV}**

I think our imagination of this occasion, the initiation of the Lord's last supper, is often misled by the painting by Leonardo da Vinci. We have seen that painting so often that we imagine these men gathered around the table as da Vinci pictured it. In fact, as someone has said, it looks as though Jesus had just said to them, "All you fellows who want to get into the picture, come over on this side of the table!" But that is not the way it was. They were not seated around the table, and they certainly were not seated on just three sides of the table. They were lying on couches around a low table, in the Roman custom, which the Jews of this time also observed. In that arrangement, the head of John the disciple lay close to the breast of Jesus. But on the other side of Jesus, equally close to him, was Judas, so that the head of Jesus lay near the breast of Judas. This must have been the arrangement, in order to allow for the interchange that went on at the Lord's table. When Jesus said, "It is one who is dipping bread in the same dish with me who is going to betray me," there were only two of the disciples who could have reached the same dish that Jesus used -- John and Judas. What he was saying to the other disciples was that it was one of those two.

And yet, forever to the credit of these disciples, when Jesus said, "It is one of you twelve who is going to

betray me," not one of them said, "I know who it is; it's he." Instead, they looked at Jesus and said, "Lord, is it I?" Every one of us recognizes the feeling that there is something evil in us, something we do not trust, something we are not sure will not break out sometime and carry us into acts that appall us, deeds we are aghast at the thought of doing. Something of that self-distrust gripped these men at that moment, and they said, "Is it I?" But Jesus reassured them, said, "No, it's the one who is dipping his hand in the dish with me."

Other accounts tell us that shortly after this he said to Judas privately, "What you are about to do, go and do quickly." And Judas left the company. But before he left, Jesus said to these disciples, "The Son of man goes as it is written of him," i.e., it had been predicted that he would be betrayed by one of his own, and this was being fulfilled. But, and this is important to notice, Jesus also said, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!" Woe to him! -- not because he is doing something he cannot help doing, because he could have helped it. Judas was not driven to betray the Lord; he chose to do so. This is why Jesus adds what are probably the most solemn words that ever fell from his lips: "It would have been better for that man if he had never been born." I do not think that any more fearful words ever came from the lips of Jesus. Wouldn't you hate to have him say that about you?

But now, the last scene:

**And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body. "And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." {Mark 14:22-25 RSV}**

This obviously is symbolism. Our Lord is teaching again by means of symbols, but the symbols are very significant. He took the bread, and said, "This is my body," and he broke the bread, symbolizing how his body would be broken. And he took the cup, and said, "This is the blood of the new covenant," i.e., the new agreement that God makes with men by faith, and not by works; by believing, and not by performance. That is the New Covenant. Then he reminded them that this was the end, that he would never drink of the cup again until he drank it new in the fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

Now we can understand why Mark has put this account alongside the story of Mary of Bethany. For here our Lord is showing these disciples that he was doing to them what Mary had done to him. She brought a beautiful alabaster flask, and she broke it. He said, "My body is that flask, and I am going to be broken for you." She poured out of the flask all the ointment that was in it, so that the fragrance of it filled the room, as it has filled the earth in the centuries since. And Jesus said, "I will pour out of the flask of my body [what Peter calls 'the precious blood'], all of it, for you, that the fragrance of it may fill your life, and fill the whole earth."

Yesterday I saw the new film, *The Hiding Place* -- a wonderful film; do not miss it. It is one of the most powerfully moving films I have ever seen. In the midst of it is a scene set in the Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Bessie are there, along with ten thousand other women, in the horribly degrading, hideous conditions of this camp. They are gathered with some of the women in the barracks in the midst of the beds, cold and hungry and lice-ridden, and Bessie is leading a Bible class. One of the other women calls out derisively from her bunk and mocks their worship of God. They fall into a conversation, and this woman says what so frequently is flung at Christians: "If your God is such a good God, why does he allow this kind of suffering?" Dramatically she tears off the bandages and old rags that bind her hands, displaying her broken, mangled fingers and says, "I'm the first violinist of the Symphony Orchestra. Did your God will this?" For a moment no one answers. Then Corrie Ten Boom steps to the side of her sister and says, in simple words, "We can't answer that question. All we know is that our God came to this earth, and became one of us, and he suffered with us and was crucified and died. And that he did for love."

That is what this story is saying to us. This is love's extravagance. When you and I partake of the table of the Lord together, Jesus is saying, "Look, it is I who break the flask of my own body, to pour out upon you all the precious ointment, so that you may understand that it is no longer law which governs your life; it is love."

## Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that you will teach us this beautiful lesson, so wonderfully exemplified by this sacrifice of Mary of Bethany, that you will help us to understand that she is but depicting a far greater sacrifice, a more beautiful act of love which can never be forgotten which will grip our hearts and teach us and strengthen us all the days of our life. May we rejoice in this, Lord, and give thanks at this moment to him who loved us and gave himself for us. We ask in his name, Amen.

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