

**“WHY THIS WASTE OF PERFUME?”****MARK 14:1-9**

I want you to imagine a situation I hope never happens to you. This afternoon you're informed you will die on Wednesday. No ifs, ands, or buts. It's a certainty you will die in less than 72 hours. How would you spend the rest of today, Monday, and Tuesday? Perhaps you'd hire an attorney and make sure all your financial and legal affairs were in order. Maybe you'd call or visit the significant people in your life to say good-bye. Spending as much time with your immediate family would undoubtedly be high on anyone's list – holding your spouse, hugging your kids or grandkids, hanging on every word, imparting some kind of final message to those you love most. Or, it could be you'd try to make right something you did wrong or restore a broken relationship. You're definitely going to die on Wednesday. What would you do and why?

Jesus died on a Friday. On the Tuesday before that Friday, He went to a party. Jesus knew full well He was going to be killed in a few days – crucified on a cross to be exact. He knew this was His Father's plan of salvation for humanity. Just three days before He was crucified – knowing full well what was in store for Him – He accepted the invitation of a man named Simon the Leper to a dinner party at Simon's home. Simon had probably suffered from the terrible disease of leprosy at some point in time, but had been cured. The party was held in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. Why was the party held? We're not told. What is clear, however, is the fact Jesus spent one of his last evenings before the cross surrounded by a group of people made up of some friends, some acquaintances, and probably some enemies, too. A dinner party of all things!

Questions Jesus answered during Holy Week – those seven days between what we call Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. That's the theme of a series of messages I'm sharing with you on these Sundays leading up to this year's Holy Week which begins on March 25 (Palm Sunday) and ends April 1 (Easter Sunday). The different questions – and how Jesus answered them – give us insight into Him and what He's done for us through His life, death, and resurrection. So, let's read the story of what happened at this party, the question that was asked there, and how Jesus answered it. Some portion of the dinner guests there that night asked, “Why this waste of perfume?” It was asked after a very unusual incident occurred at this party. It was something Jesus wanted to be remembered for all time. And it has been for some 2,000 years. In many ways, it's a story about love. One way of getting at its meaning is to contrast the group who asked the question with the woman who anointed Jesus and then with Jesus Himself. Let's think, first of all, about...

**THE DISCIPLES' EXACT LOVE**

This story – or a variation of it – is told in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Mark didn't identify the people who asked this question, but Matthew did. “A woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. ‘Why this waste?’ they asked.” (Mt. 26:7-8 NIV) The disciples saw what she did as wasteful. Something utterly frivolous and careless. Something was squandered or misused.

Before we write them off as hopeless dopes, let's think through what this woman did. This woman took a bottle of perfume and poured its contents all over Jesus' head. It was a fragrance known as nard. That one bottle of perfume had the value of an average family's income for one year. Google told me this week that the average family income in the US in 2017 was \$59,000. That was some expensive perfume, yes?!

Let's be honest. I'm attending a dinner party at your home and one of your guests comes in and pours a \$59,000 bottle of perfume all over your head. What am I supposed to think? I don't know how you're put together, but I have no problem seeing myself siding with the disciples on this one! "Hey, friend, you didn't smell that bad! How can this person be so incredibly wasteful? Think of all the good that could've been done with \$59,000! You could feed a whole lot of hungry kids. You could support missionaries. You could get some homeless people off the street" No, if I'd been at Simon's dinner party, I'd be right in there with those disciples, "Good grief, lady, we all love Jesus, but you don't have to waste \$59,000 proving it, do you?" I'd have been in there judging, pontificating, and pouting righteous indignation right along with them. Jesus' answer would have shocked me, that's for sure. "Leave her alone. Why criticize her for doing such a good thing to me?" (Mk. 14:6 NLT) Really, Jesus?

Did the disciples condemn this woman for loving Jesus? Of course not! They just criticized the way she loved Jesus. It was absurd, kind of nuts! They had what you might call an exact love for Jesus. What's an "exact" love? Measured, moderate, and appropriate love. Oh, they loved Jesus no doubt, but how did they love Him? It was carefully measured out, exact love. It was a calculated, sensible, frugal, and absolutely practical love for Jesus. Nothing over the top. I can't speak for you, but all too often that's just how I express love. "Yeah, OK, it's good to love, but let's not go overboard here and get carried away!" All too often that's how we love our spouse, our kids, our friends, those who don't know Jesus yet, and yes, that's even how we love Jesus.

Measured. Moderate. Sensible. Practical. Appropriate. In other words, exact love. Here's a couple of characteristics about exact love. First, exact love looks for a return. "Now, Lord, if I pray this much, go to church this often, give this much money, help that person, then, how much blessing can I expect back from You?" Truth be told, we often love others like that, too. Second, exact love is limited to my own comfort zone. All of us have things we know the Lord wants us to do or to become, but they're just not comfortable. "Well, Lord, I'll go to church on Sunday mornings occasionally, but that's it when it comes to the God stuff in my life. I'm not comfortable giving more. Well, Lord, I'll do some kind of ministry as long as it's on a day and at a time that's comfortable for me. Well, Lord, I'll give money to support the work of Your Kingdom, but the tithe isn't comfortable. Well, Lord, I'll be happy to share my faith with someone as long as it's comfortable." Are you getting the idea? Exact love is limited to my own comfort zone. "Why this waste of perfume?" The disciples' love was exact. Let's think next about...

## **MARY'S EXCESSIVE LOVE**

Mary who? In Matthew and Mark's version of this story, the woman who poured perfume all over Jesus' head is an unidentified woman. In John's Gospel, the woman was identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It's found in the chapter after Lazarus was raised from the dead, so perhaps anointing Jesus was Mary's way of showing Jesus gratitude for the miracle involving her brother. It's interesting to me as well that John remembered Mary pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiping it off with her hair, while Matthew and Mark remembered the woman pouring it on Jesus' head. Who knows, maybe she did both! It was considered a courtesy back then to pour a few drops of perfume on a guest's head as a sign of welcome and appreciation. But Mary got completely carried away! She poured out the entire contents of the bottle onto Jesus' head and feet. This was no ordinary perfume. It was probably a family heirloom passed down to Mary. It was probably her greatest financial asset. It was worth \$59,000 in today's money! But there was such love in Mary's heart for Jesus that it demanded an over the top expression – an expression beyond mere words. It demanded that Mary give her most precious possession to Jesus. This was an act of love. But what kind of love? Excessive love. Reckless love. Sacrificial love.

Mary's love for Jesus repels and attracts me all at the same time. I'm repelled by it because – to be honest – my own love for Jesus is probably pretty exact, routine, measured, and practical. It's like the disciples' love for Jesus. Right here, however, is a good place for an important clarification. Excessive love doesn't replace routine love. Loving other people – or loving God for that matter - in routine, normal, faithful, every day ways is never second-rate love. For example, consider how you express love on a human level to members of your family. You get up and go to work to provide for their needs. You pay the bills. You cook the meals. You wash the clothes. When you do the normal, everyday stuff consistently and joyfully, aren't you demonstrating authentic love? Absolutely! By the same token, the way you and I express our love for God often looks and feels pretty routine. We reflected last week on ways we love God. A lot of it is about being faithful in pretty non-spectacular ways – things like consistent prayer, meditating on the Word, developing a God mind-set, regular worship, serving, giving, intentionally being a disciple of Jesus, taking the initiative to reach out to people who need Jesus to become their Savior, and just allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us.

It's just that healthy love sometimes needs more than the routine and the normal. In a Peanuts cartoon strip, Lucy – who is madly in love with piano-playing Schroeder – says to him, "Guess what, if you don't tell me you love me, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to hold my breath until I pass out!" Schroeder looks up from his piano and replies, "Breath holding in children is an interesting phenomenon. It could indicate a metabolic disorder. A 40 milligram dose of vitamin B6 twice a day might be helpful. Yes, you likely need vitamin B6. You might also consider eating bananas, avocados, and beef liver." As he goes back to playing his piano, Lucy sighs and says, "I ask for love, and all I get is beef liver!"

Doesn't a love that's healthy, robust, and alive have to break out of the routine once and awhile? For example, take the love between a husband and a wife. An excessive, over the top act of love adds a bit of spice, sparkle, and sizzle to an already healthy

relationship. If your love for your spouse is always sensible, predictable, and reliably routine, it can become a little boring and lifeless. Healthy love means occasionally you pull out the stops, get a little wild and crazy, and do something unexpected. An unexpected gift. A spontaneous hug. An unsolicited word of appreciation. Without an occasional act of celebration, love in a marriage can become dull, routine, and exact.

Now, our primary focus today is how we express love to God. Well, never forget God is a Person, so just like us He appreciates when we love Him excessively. Jesus was never more personal and human anywhere in the Bible than in this story. “Leave her alone. Why criticize her for doing such a good thing to me? ...She has done what she could and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time.” (Mk. 14:6-8 NLT) Jesus knew He was going to be nailed to a cross in less than three days. No doubt He was already feeling the dread of it – the apprehension of it - in His heart and mind. How He Himself needed to be loved at that moment – loved excessively! Mary could not have known the significance of what she did or how it impacted Jesus. There’s a truth about love right there worth remembering, by the way. The positive results of your love for God and for others will always be greater than you can imagine.

Here’s a question worth asking yourself today: Is there anything excessive about my love for Jesus? Something a little reckless, over the top, crazy? We’re not down grading all those routine ways to show God we love Him – prayer, worship, giving, serving, etc. Not for a minute. Keep doing all those things. Some so-called followers of Jesus can’t get even that far with any consistency. But here’s the challenge. Does our love for Jesus ever get excessive? Is it ever spontaneous, risky, sacrificial, over the top. Would anyone look at the way we express our love for Jesus and think it was excessive or crazy? Or, would anyone get offended by the way we love Jesus?

Here’s a few characteristics of excessive love. Excessive love takes a risk. It’s willing to move beyond your comfort zone. Last week we were reminded that the greatest demonstration of loving God is to love your neighbor as yourself. Excessive love often takes risks by extending God’s love to other people. What does that mean for you? Making the effort to restore a broken relationship and risking rejection. Meeting a need in another person’s life and risking personal sacrifice. Taking the initiative to point a spiritually lost person to Jesus and risking awkwardness or disinterest. The Holy Spirit will prompt you to love Jesus by loving others. Reach out to a visitor – a complete stranger - today. Send a check to someone in need. Make a phone call. Write a letter or an e-mail. Visit a discouraged friend. Excessive love takes a risk.

Excessive love is usually occasional and spontaneous. Mary didn’t express her love like this every day. She couldn’t afford to! Nor do you get the impression she had this act of love all planned out well in advance. Excessive love seizes the moment. It refuses to calculate and plan out everything in advance. Those moments when God invites us to love Him or love others excessively are probably few and far between. But when it comes, do it! Don’t miss the opportunity when it comes! A poor widow contributed what seemed like a huge amount of money to a charitable organization. She was asked if it was just too much for a person in her financial circumstances. She

answered, “Love is not afraid of giving too much.” Are you afraid of giving too much of yourself away to Jesus? “Why this waste of perfume, Jesus?” The disciples’ love was exact. Mary’s love was excessive. What can we say about Jesus’ love?

## **JESUS’ EXTRAVAGANT LOVE**

God Himself is an extravagant Person! On a clear night you can see about 2,000 stars. Astronomers tell us that there are billions of stars in the universe. Most of them probably no one but God will ever see! God has made over 200,000 kinds of flowers and 9,000 kinds of birds – just excessively extravagant! Sure, God does the routine, practical stuff, but He’s fundamentally an extravagant Person who loves excessively. We worship and serve an extravagant, excessive, over the top God! One evidence of the fact Jesus was and is God in human flesh is the sheer extravagance of His love for us. That’s why Mary’s act of love meant so much to Jesus. He recognized in it the love He has for you and me. Just as Mary broke her jar of perfume – her greatest earthly possession – and poured it out on Jesus’ head, so Jesus allowed His body to be broken and His life’s blood to be poured out for us. It was an illustration of extravagant, excessive love! That’s why Jesus refused to condemn Mary’s act of love as something wasteful. He saw in her love the same kind of love that would nail Him to a cross.

A side note is appropriate right here. In answering the disciples’ question, Jesus said, “You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But you will not always have me.” (Mk. 14:7 NLT) Don’t misinterpret Jesus’ statement. He wasn’t being fatalistic or uncaring about poverty or poor people. He was simply pointing out to His disciples the opportunity to help the poor was always there, but Mary’s act of excessive love could only have been done at that moment in time. Her spontaneity and uncalculated willingness to give up what was most precious to her was what ministered to Jesus in a special way. “She has done what she could and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time. I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman’s deed will be remembered and discussed.” (Mk. 14:8-9 NLT) Has it ever occurred to you that because God is fundamentally extravagant and excessive, that He might just value being loved extravagantly and excessively? Just once in a while, just occasionally?

As wonderful as Mary’s act of excessive love happened to be, it doesn’t begin to compare with Jesus’ extravagant love. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the greatest demonstration of that extravagance is Jesus’ love for sinners – for people who in no way deserve, merit, or have earned that love. Only God knows why, but Jesus loves sinners like you and me! The Bible says, “When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.... But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.” (Rom. 5:6, 8 NLT) “For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:21 NLT) “Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?” (Rom. 8:32 NLT) Jesus loves sinners. He loves them extravagantly. When He came into this world, He stepped down and away from all the advantages of divine power and

privilege. He lowered Himself and became like us in every way possible - except for the sin part - so that He might become our Savior and Deliverer.

Yes, Jesus absolutely dreaded the cross. It was just three days away. But He dreaded even more the thought of an eternity without you and me. Every time you see a cross, you're reminded of the extravagant love of Jesus. When you come forward today and partake of the bread and the cup, you'll be reminded of the extravagant love of Jesus. Excessive. Almost wasteful. Something beyond logic and reason. Imagine the Son of God giving up His life and suffering all that humiliation to save the likes of you and me. Wonder at it. Let it blow your mind again. Let your "flabber" be "gasted" all over again. And then, be glad! Be glad there's nothing exact about God's love. Aren't you glad that it's excessive and extravagant beyond our description and beyond our understanding?

On February 14 our national nightmare continued. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. A 19 year old killed 17 people and wounded another 16 with an assault rifle. Valentine's Day. A hideous irony. On the day our culture celebrates love, we witnessed an act of unspeakable evil and hatred. But actually love was demonstrated on that awful day at that unfortunate school. Extravagant love in fact. There were several people who acted heroically that day. One of them was 37 year old Aaron Feis who was one of the 17 people killed. He was a security guard, counselor, and a football coach at the high school. He was kind of an ordinary person in many ways. He drove the team bus for a variety of sports. He himself drove a 30-year-old pickup truck with broken windshield wipers and worked as a lawn man on weekends to earn extra money. Feis is survived by his wife and a daughter. Over a thousand people attended his funeral at a local church in the community. Six of his offensive linemen served as pallbearers for the ceremony.

What is extraordinary is how Aaron Feis died. When the shooting started, a friend thought it was firecrackers. The last words he heard from Aaron Feis came over the walkie-talkie: "That was no firecracker." On the last day of his life, Aaron Feis became a burly bodyguard for the kids he loved as his own. He was seen driving his golf cart then sprinting on foot toward the shooter, a former student. He shielded students from bullets and pushed at least one girl out of the line of fire before he was struck and later died from his wounds. "When Aaron Feis died... he did it protecting others," said Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel. "Before you even heard how he died, you knew he died putting himself in harm's way to save others. That's who he was — running toward danger, while others were correctly running away from it. Feis had no gun, no rifle; yet he ran toward [the gunfire] helping students." Extravagant love.

You can't help but be filled with awe, wonder, and gratitude when you see an act of extravagant love. It doesn't get more extravagant than when someone lays down his life for someone else. And no one loved more extravagantly than Jesus — not even Aaron Feis. That's what communion represents and what we remember every time we receive it. Extravagant love. On the day of His death. Jesus took the bullet of sin, the bullet of death, the bullet of evil, the bullet of eternal damnation meant for you and me. He paid the penalty. He ran toward the cross — not away from it - despising all the pain and the shame so that you and I could receive life eternal. Extravagant love indeed.