

April 23/24, 2005

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

The Heart of Worship

Mark 14:1-11

Pastor Bryan Clark

Do you think that steps of faith are always in alignment with common sense—with what we would consider to be prudent, practical and explainable?

Years ago I was finishing up my bachelor's degree and I had to go back to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago to pick up six hours in the summer. In order to do that, you had to take six weeks, one hour per week. Summer school tends to pack it in, and that was the way it was done. Patti and I were married, and she was going to stay with my parents here in Lincoln while I finished the hours, and then we would be off to California to go to seminary.

So all the arrangements were made, and I left and went to Chicago. I was standing in the registrar's line to sign up for my classes, fully intending to be there for six weeks. But it was the strangest thing. While I was standing there, I started to get this feeling within that I needed to take five hours in three weeks. In looking at the schedule, I could arrange two classes and do that. Then I could go home for two weeks and come back for the final week. But it said in big, red, bold type that you were not supposed to do that—highly recommended not to do that—but rather, one hour per week. So I took that to heart.

But as I was moving up through the line, I just had this overwhelming impression that, *I need to do this. This seems foolish; this seems to go against the advice of the registrar—but I think I should.* So I got all the way to the registrar's table and I said, "I'd like to take these two classes together, so I'll get five hours in three weeks, and then I can go home a couple weeks and come back for the last one."

"Mr. Clark, that's highly discouraged. That is not recommended."

And I said, "Well, I know. I can read it right here on the paper, but I really feel like that's what I need to do." So the main registrar came over (he was kind of "the heavy") and gave me all the reasons why that was foolish. And I understood all that; I was processing all that. But I said, "You know, I just really feel like this is what I need to do, and I can't really explain this." So they kind of rolled their eyes and signed me up.

Less than a week later, Patti called and said that suddenly my dad had taken a turn for the worse. The doctor had come out and they were thinking it was probably the beginning of the end. I called on Father's Day, and I couldn't even get him to understand who I was. So each day I was expecting the phone to ring and for Patti to tell me he was gone. I was pouring all my emotional energy into my studies (which is kind of the way I'm wired) and I made it all the way through.

On Friday of the third week I finished my two finals, jumped in the car and drove to Lincoln. At that point, my dad had been in a coma-type state. It was late at night when I arrived, and I went into his bedside and said, "Dad, I'm home." He kind of perked up and he said, "I'm glad you're home." After that he faded away and 24 hours later he had died. I was there for the funeral. I was there for all the arrangements. I was there for those two weeks. At the end of those two weeks I was free to go back to school, finish the last class, and go off to seminary.

I've often thought about that, because if I had taken six weeks in a row, I would have had to drop out. Those courses weren't offered again until the next summer. I wouldn't have gone on to

seminary that year, which means I wouldn't have ended up in Broken Bow. I wouldn't have ended up in Lincoln. There is a whole domino effect of how that would have changed my life.

There were several people telling me that what I was doing was not wise. It was not practical. It was not "the way we do it." And I understood that.

Think about the stories of the Old Testament. Think about Abraham. God came to Abraham when he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, which was a very modern city in its time, very convenient, very comfortable. And God said to Abraham, "*I want you to leave here and I want you to go to a land I've promised you.*" "Well, God, where are we going?" "*I'll tell you as we go. It's out in the desert somewhere.*" Imagine explaining that to the family: "We're going to leave everything we have here and we're going to go to some land we don't really know." That doesn't seem terribly prudent. It doesn't seem practical. It doesn't even seem wise.

Think about Gideon. Gideon had an army of 32,000 men, and they were going to fight an army, the Midianites, that were so numerous the text simply says they were like locusts in the valley; you couldn't even count them. Now 32,000 against that army already seems rather foolish, but God whittled that army down to 300 and wanted Gideon to fight the battle with just 300. Can you imagine the conversation as He explains that to the soldiers? "Men, we're so overwhelmed that we are going to whittle the army down to 300." That doesn't make sense. You can hear the soldiers: "This isn't right. This isn't prudent. This isn't practical. This doesn't make any sense."

Joshua was considered to be a military genius. Yet, when it was time to take Jericho, God's plan was "to go march around the city seven times and then blow your trumpet." Can you imagine explaining that to the troops? "Wow, General, how much time did you spend in the war room coming up with that one?"

But one thing all three of these men had in common was that they had a heart to obey. I don't think it's common, but I do think on occasion God asks us to take extravagant steps of faith that may seem a little bit irresponsible, not really practical, not really safe, not comfortable. If you have it in your mind that the walk of faith is always going to make sense, always going to be safe, always going to be comfortable, always going to be prudent—that it can always be determined on the basis of common sense and running the numbers—you will never walk the walk of faith.

That certainly raises a question: How do we know when it's one of those moments where we take such an unusual, extravagant step of faith?

Turn with me to Mark chapter 14. This text reminds us again that the Gospels, and for that matter, all the Books of the Bible, are not arranged always chronologically. They are always arranged theologically. This is a case where Mark applies what we've referred to as the sandwich technique. We've seen this many times in Mark—where he starts talking about one thing, and then he shifts and goes to something else, and then he comes back to that first thing again. And every time he does that, what he is doing is forcing you to draw comparison, and typically it's a comparison between people's hearts.

In this case, I think the events that he is talking about are taking place on Wednesday. But in between the events he talks about, he slips back to a story that happened the Friday before Palm Sunday and pulls that into the discussion. It is a little bit out of chronological order. But it is very much in theological order to make a point.

Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, “Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people.” (Mark 14: 1-2, *NASB)

Passover was probably the holiest of all celebrations for the Jewish people. It was followed by seven days of what was called the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These religious leaders are plotting to seize Jesus, but there are so many people in Jerusalem for the festival that they think, *Not now.*

One of the things we need to process a little bit is to understand that these religious leaders would have celebrated Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the nth degree. They would have crossed every “t”; they would have dotted every “i.” They would have kept every law and ritual perfectly—all the while plotting to put to death God in the flesh.

There is a belief in our culture that if somebody is so passionately committed to their religious system, God has just got to “let them in.” I hear it all the time. I hear people say, “You can’t tell me that these people who are so committed, so dedicated to their religious system, are not going to make it into heaven.” Read the text. There has never been a group of people as dedicated to the religious system as the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees. And at the exact time that they were following through on the holiest of days, they were plotting to kill God in the flesh. Just because someone is highly dedicated to their religious beliefs does not mean they are right with God.

Mark wants to contrast that with the story of a woman who in the text is nameless. We know from the Gospel of John it is Mary, the sister of Lazarus.

While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, “Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they were scolding her. (vs. 3-5)

Simon was a leper that Jesus had healed. There is a story that is similar to this in Luke 7. The main similarity is it happens in the home of one named Simon, which was as common of a name then as John is today. But the rest of the details are quite different. That is an interaction with the Pharisees; this is with the disciples. They are two distinct events, and it is good to keep them separate.

This woman whom we know to be Mary comes in and she has this alabaster vial. The container itself would have been of extreme value. It was made of a glass material, and the only way to open it was by literally breaking off the neck. Because it could not be resealed, one hundred percent of the contents had to be used at one time. It contained a perfume that came from the root of a plant in India—this pure nard that was extremely valuable. We are told it was worth over three hundred denarii, which is basically a year’s salary. If you want to put it into language of people living in Lincoln, Nebraska, this perfume was worth about \$35,000. This is not a bottle of Aqua Velva.

She comes in and she breaks the vial. In an act of worship, she pours it on Jesus’ head. Now, when we hear these stories, I think in our minds we have an image of this oily stuff running down His face—kind of goopy and messy. But the reality is this perfume was very light, and the

moment it touched His hair it would have quickly evaporated and just left this absolutely wondrous aroma.

This probably represented all of Mary's life savings. She had probably invested everything in this one precious perfume that was probably being saved for burial; that would have been common. But she brings it to Jesus and pours it on His head.

We are not told in the Book of Mark who responds, but we *are* told in Matthew and John. It's the disciples. They don't look at one another and say, "Well, that was kind of silly." The terminology is very strong. It says they responded very "indignantly"—that's a Greek word that means to respond with violent anger. They were very upset: "This perfume could have been sold for three hundred denarii and could have fed the poor."

It was common during the festivals that money would go toward the poor. Maybe that is what they were referring to. We know from earlier in the Gospel of Mark that two hundred denarii could feed five thousand, so three hundred denarii could feed seven to eight thousand people. This, in their own words, was a waste. Now if you stop and think about that, there is some logic to that. Okay, she comes in, she breaks it, she makes Jesus smell good, OR you could feed eight thousand hungry people. They're all listening to that and saying, "That's a good point."

I happen to think there's something deeper in their hearts that caused them to be influenced to go negative so quickly. I think they feel like she maybe showed them up a little bit. She was willing to give more than they were, and it irritated them. And when somebody went negative, they responded with, "Hey, that makes sense. This could have been sold; this could have fed the poor. This was a bad thing to do." They scolded her, "What do you think you're doing? What a waste!"

But the question is: What did Jesus think?

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." (vs. 6-9)

How would you like to be one of those disciples at that moment? The very behavior that they scolded, Jesus is saying, "In the years to come, 2,000 years later in Lincoln, Nebraska, this woman's deed will still be held up as a model of what it means to love and worship Me." He commends the very behavior they were scolding.

Jesus says to them, "Why are you scolding her? What she has done is a good thing." In essence He is saying, "If you have such a concern for the poor, they are always there. Empty your accounts and take care of them. But this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for this woman to express the deepest devotion of worship to her Savior." Jesus is saying, "The poor you will always have, but I won't always be with you. There are these rare opportunities where you have a chance to offer extravagant worship as a way of expressing your love and devotion to your Savior."

Jesus refers to His upcoming burial. Because this is Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and we know that Jesus spent a considerable amount of time in the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, you would have to imagine that Jesus often spoke of His upcoming death to His disciples and that discussion was overheard. Even though the disciples at this point didn't seem to understand that,

it appears that Mary did, and she knew that Jesus' days were numbered and this might be her only opportunity to give the most valuable thing she has in an extravagant expression of her worship. And Jesus saw her heart and He said, "In the years to come, what this woman did will be held up as a model. Don't give Me a bunch of religious ritual; don't go through the motions. I want the deepest, most valuable expression of your worship." He says she gave all that she could.

You do have to wonder what was going on in the hearts of the disciples. I could understand it if it were the Pharisees... but the disciples? Why didn't they get it? How could they miss that so badly that they were actually scolding the very behavior that Jesus would hold up as a model of celebration and worship?

We know from the Gospel of John that the ringleader was Judas, and his story continues.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time. (vs. 10-11)

Jesus sandwiches the heart of the religious leaders and the heart of Judas in between the beautiful heart of this woman. We know from the Gospel of John that Judas was the one that first offered the line that this was inappropriate because the perfume could have been sold to feed the poor. But John goes on to say that Judas had no concern for the poor. He was the treasurer and he had been pilfering from the treasury, and he just wanted more money in the treasury so he had more to pilfer from. His heart was black; it was ugly.

Judas led the way in saying that what this woman offered Jesus was a waste. But it is very interesting in John 17, in what is referred to as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, that He refers to Judas as the "son of perdition," which is a translation of the Greek word for waste. As a matter of fact, it is the exact same Greek word translated "waste" in Mark 14:4. In other words, Judas was the one that declared this woman's expression of worship to be a waste. But Jesus turned right around and identified Judas as one who had wasted his life. The difference between worship and waste is a matter of our value system. It's a matter of heart. It's a matter of perspective.

What Judas said at Simon's house seemed very reasonable. I mentioned before, I think the disciples' hearts were a little bit defensive. They responded a little bit negatively by this extravagant gift. Oftentimes when people take huge steps of faith, it kind of exposes the littleness of our faith and we react to that. So when Judas went down this path of negativity, that made sense to them. Their hearts were already leaning a little bit that way, and they went with the discussion: "Yeah, that's right. We should have sold this. We should have taken care of the poor. This was a bad thing. You are to be scolded."

But once they became aware of the ugliness of Judas' heart (and according to the Gospels they did not know it until Judas actually betrayed Jesus, because Judas was very good at hiding his heart), at that moment and in the subsequent days, how many times do you suppose they went back to those events at Simon's house and regretted being led into that negativity by someone with such a bad heart?

I would encourage all of us to be very careful of who influences us. People with bad hearts become very good at saying things that sound right. They sound reasonable; they sound

practical. And if there is a lean in our heart toward negativity, we can actually find ourselves scolding the very thing that Jesus considers to be of great value.

The reality is, in the walk of faith there will be those times (I don't think they're common, but I think there are those moments) where God calls us to do something unusual, something a little bit extravagant, something that others may scold. I think in the life of an individual there are those times when God calls us to take big steps of faith—those windows of opportunity that don't come along very often—where we have a chance to express the love and devotion of our heart to Jesus in a very unique way. And those are moments that can be seized, or they are moments that can be lost.

I think it is also true of the church. In the life of the church there are those moments where God brings a church to a point where He invites them to take unusual, significant steps of faith as an expression of love and devotion and trust. And they don't come along everyday.

A couple years ago when we as a board were talking about where we needed to go as a church and were coming to grips with the need to build an auditorium to be consistent with the mission God has called us to, it was a wrestling match. None of us were sitting there thinking, *Yeah, this just makes good sense. This is practical. This is prudent. We've run the numbers; it all works out. Let's do it.* It was just the opposite. It was recognizing, *This is big. This seems a little bit extraordinary. This seems unusual. This doesn't seem to be practical or prudent.* We tried as hard as we could to talk ourselves out of it.

But about the time that we were settling in with, "Okay, okay, we need to do this," then it was as if God came along and said, "*Oh, by the way, I'd like you to build a youth building.*" "Oh, that is a great idea. As soon as we have that auditorium done and we have that thing paid for, we'll build that youth building." "*No, I'd like you to do it at the same time.*" "All right."

"*Oh, by the way,*" God said, "*I really would like you to hive off several hundred people and start a church in north Lincoln.*" "Oh, God, that is a great idea. We'll get that youth building done. We'll get that auditorium done. The church will grow and we'll recover, and we'll do that. We promise." "*No, I'd like you to do it at the same time.*" "Okay."

"*Oh, by the way, in the process I'd also like the church to fund and support 100 church planters in India.*" "Oh, yeah, we'll do that. I mean, we really will someday—we'll do that." "*No, I'd like it to be done at the same time. And just in case you're wondering, I'd like you to start a leadership college, too. I'd like you to do that all at once.*"

That doesn't sound very prudent or very practical. It doesn't even sound reasonable.

A year and a half ago I stood up here at the State of the Church, and when I unveiled this vision, I in no way had it in my mind that I was sharing something that seemed to be reasonable, that seemed to be practical, that seemed to be in alignment with common sense. I didn't think anybody was going to get out a calculator and run the numbers and say, "Oh yeah, that's a good idea." I figured most people would think, *Those people are crazy!*

But there was one thing that we were struggling with as a board that we simply could not walk away from, and that is we believed God was saying, "*Do this.*" And to choose not to do it would be, in our minds, to choose to disobey. In that State of the Church message, that was what was in my heart. I didn't think it was reasonable. I didn't think it was practical. I didn't think it was prudent. I just believed God was saying, "*Do it.*" I said to you on that weekend, "I believe the people of Lincoln Berean will pray about this, and God will lead. And if it is what God wants, it will become evident."

Well, here we are a year and a half later, and what has transpired has been absolutely extraordinary. Today you could not convince me that God is not in this. As a matter of fact, to conclude that God is not in this, in my mind, is to be as unteachable as the Pharisees. I don't know what more evidence you need. I can't tell you that we've got everything figured out for how this is all going to work out. I don't. All I know is I believe God has said, "*I want you to do this,*" and we need to be obedient.

This past year and a half there have been some amazing stories of people responding in obedience. There have been many stories; we have just shared a few of them. I think about John and DeeAnn's story of downsizing their house in order to help with the campaign. I think about Rick and Shari not building a house and downsizing their vehicles. I think about the story a couple weeks ago of Bob unloading his retirement accounts.

I would guess that after each one of those videos there were some interesting discussions behind closed doors. And I would guess there were some people that scolded them: *They were foolish. They were impractical. They were not aligning with common sense.* Be careful! You may be scolding the very act of worship that Jesus celebrates.

We have never said that everybody needs to do that. Every time one of those stories runs, we have said, "We are not saying everybody needs to do this." I would not want you to do one thing that you do not believe God is leading you to do. All we have been asking is: Are you willing to be open and to consider what God would have you to do? And are you willing to be obedient to that?

But like the opportunity for this woman in Mark 14, I do not believe that these opportunities come along every day. I think twenty years from now we'll look back at this as a very significant time in the life of the church, and for many people it will be life changing. But there are those moments that God gives us where we have opportunities to respond with extravagant expressions of our worship to tell Jesus how much we love Him and trust Him.

I can't tell you how many times in the last year and a half where I have thanked God that He has allowed me to be here for such a time as this. I've never looked at the mirror and believed that I am in any way responsible for this. I am just thankful to be here for the ride, and I would hate to miss being a part of what God is doing. There are people every bit as faithful, every bit as godly, every bit as committed, that will go through their entire Christian life and never have a chance to experience what God is offering us.

I think there will always be those people who will have hearts of obedience that will respond with extravagant worship and respond in unusual ways. And I think there will always be those people who will be there to scold them. The only question is: Which will you be?

Our Father, we are thankful that You are a God who loves us and You lead us. And God, now You give us the opportunities to express our love and devotion, to express our heart of worship in unusual, extravagant ways—in ways that will be life changing. Lord, we understand there will always be those who, for reasons only really known to them, will be there to scold and to criticize. But Lord, there will be many who will open up their hearts in obedience and seize the moment to be part of something very special that You are doing among us. Lord, for that we thank You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Study Questions

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The Heart of Worship

Mark 14:1-11

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Opening Discussion

1. Do you think obedience to Christ always makes sense to others who are watching us? Explain.
2. Can you think of a time when you were scolded by other Christians for doing what you believed God called you to do? How did you process the criticism?
3. Have you ever been negatively influenced by someone who sounded very convincing, only to regret it later when the truth became evident? How do we prevent this from happening?

Bible Study

1. Read Mark 14:1-11. Notice Mark's sandwich technique in recording the story of the woman at Simon's house between the discussion of the plan of the scribes, chief priests and Judas. The purpose of the technique is to force a comparison.

2. In what ways can people today be like the religious leaders in Jesus' day?

How could they be so diligent to follow the rules and rituals, even celebrate Passover, all the while plotting the murder of the Messiah?

What is it that truly defines a godly person?

3. Why did "some" (Matthew 26:8 tells us the "some" are the disciples) react so indignantly to the woman's act of worship? Why did they scold the very act that Jesus praised?
4. The disciples accused the woman of "wasting" the perfume on Jesus. Imagine the disciples are in your LifeGroup. How would you respond to their statement that the perfume was wasted on Jesus?

What is true waste? (Note: Jesus calls Judas the "son of perdition" in John 17:12. The word translated "perdition" is the same Greek word translated "waste" in Mark 14:4.)

5. Why did Jesus praise the woman's action? What did He see that the disciples missed?

What do we learn from the woman's example?

6. We know from John's Gospel that the main objector to the woman's act was Judas. His stated reason was his great concern for the poor. However, John tells us the real reason was because he was a thief and had been pilfering money from their money box (see John 12:1-8). Yet, Judas' act was convincing enough that he influenced the other disciples to scold her as well (see Matthew 26:8). How sobering it must have been for the disciples to learn in a week that Judas, the one who influenced them to scold the woman, had such a bad heart he would actually betray Jesus for a few pieces of silver. What do we learn from this about allowing some people to influence our response to other people?
7. This story records two actions that will never be forgotten: the worship of Jesus and the betrayal of Jesus. Summarize in one sentence the point Mark is trying to make.

Application

1. What are some practical steps we can take to avoid being negatively influenced by someone as the disciples were?
2. What does Jesus really want from us, and how do we cultivate it in our lives?
3. The disciples confused worship with waste. What is the difference?

Is there any specific area of your life that is currently in the waste category that needs to be recaptured for worship?