

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 14:1-11

Topic

Jesus praises Mary for anointing Him with costly spikenard as they were eating supper

Title

"I Love the Smell of Spikenard in the Meeting"

Introduction

They're called *Air Smell-it-zers*. They were named after howitzers, only they emit *smells*, not *shells*.

They can be found all over Disney parks, emitting smells in certain areas to match the surroundings.

You'll notice the scent of baking cookies and vanilla on Main Street USA, salty sea air in line for Pirates of the Caribbean, fresh citrus on Soarin', and the scent of honey on Pooh's Adventure.

The smell-it-zer operates like an air cannon, aiming the scent up to 200 feet across a room toward an exhaust system. Guests traveling on the moving vehicles pass through the scene as the appropriate scent drifts across their path. Regulated by computer, the scent can be triggered for a fresh aroma just prior to each vehicle's arrival.

A powerful fragrance is at the center of our Bible study. It is spikenard, a rare and expensive oil from India. Mary pours it over Jesus' head and feet in order to anoint Him. She didn't need a smell-it-zer for the aroma to fill the room.

As powerful as the smell may have been, the significance was in its symbolism. Jesus said of the anointing, "She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial" (v8).

The disciples of Jesus had a different response to the fragrance of spikenard; especially Judas. He despised it, and planned how he might betray Jesus.

These two contrary responses remind us of another place in the Bible that uses fragrance as a divisive symbol. In Second Corinthians 2:15 & 16 we read,

2Co 2:15 For we are to God the **fragrance** of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

2Co 2:16 To the one we are the **aroma of death leading to death**, and to the other the **aroma of life leading to life...**

In that room some two thousand years ago, Mary was the aroma of death to one; and the aroma of life to others.

Today, in whatever rooms we are in, whether we know it or not, we give-off the aroma of eternal life, or eternal death.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Doing What You Can For Jesus Is The Fragrance Of Eternal Death Among Those Who Are Perishing, and #2 Doing What You Can For Jesus Is The Fragrance Of Eternal Life Among Those Who Are Saved.

#1 Doing What You Can For Jesus Is The Fragrance Of Eternal Death Among Those Who Are Perishing

(v1-2 & 10-11)

The history of body odor is fascinating. The ancient Romans, for example, were fanatic about overcoming body odor. Not only did they bath all the time, they bathed in perfume, and even perfumed their pets, and their horses.

The Middle Ages were ripe with body odor. The church frowned upon nakedness, even in a bath; so folks quit bathing. Only the wealthy could afford perfumes and ointments to mask their stank.

Have you ever heard the expression, "Mum's the word?" In 1888, Mum was the name of the first trademarked antiperspirant.

Everdry came next. It should have been called Neverdry, because of how long it stayed wet after application. It also stained your clothing. Use too much of it and it ate through your clothing.

Who knew it was so hard to smell good?

The action surrounding the aroma of Jesus' anointing stinks.

Mar 14:1 After two days it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take Him by trickery and put Him to death.

Passover was the annual observance in commemoration of "the passing over" of the houses of the Israelites by the death angel in the killing of the firstborn in Egypt.

It was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan (March-April), the first month of the Jewish religious year, and it continued into the early hours of the fifteenth day.

The Passover lamb would be chosen four days prior, then slain on the afternoon of the fourteenth and eaten after sundown, which according to Jewish reckoning started the next day.

The Passover observance was immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, in commemoration of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, from the fifteenth to the twenty-first of the month.

Thus it was either Tuesday or Wednesday of the final week of Jesus on earth. In "two days," He would be crucified just as the lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple, in fulfillment of the prophecies that He was the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

Talk about corrupt leaders. The top religious leaders in Israel were seeking some "trickery" by which they could apprehend and murder Jesus, who they knew to be innocent of any crime.

Do schools still use the program, Character Counts? It does; count, that is, in all of us, but especially in our leaders. Character is a better predictor of what a person will actually do than their promises.

Mar 14:2 But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people."

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem. Maybe hundreds of thousands, if you trust the math of the Jewish historian, Josephus.

"Not during the feast" doesn't mean they were against acting while it was Passover, because they did act during Passover when the right opportunity presented itself.

It meant that they had to be cautious and stealthy. The crowds favored Jesus and the religious leaders could not risk a riot were they to take Him openly to kill Him.

They got just the opportunity they needed, from a most unlikely source - one of Jesus' own followers.

Drop down to verse ten.

Mar 14:10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them.

Never ascribe to Judas any positive motives. Some do. They say, for example, that he was trying to force Jesus to act as Messiah by engineering a conflict between He and the religious leaders that would force the Lord to establish the Kingdom.

That is a motive made-up by extra-biblical writers. The one motive ascribed to him in the Bible is greed:

- In his Gospel, John records that Judas was the disciple who held the money bag for the ministry, and that he regularly stole from it.
- John also reveals that Judas led the criticism of Mary anointing Jesus with the costly ointment because it could have fetched a pretty penny, giving Judas more to steal.
- When Judas goes to betray Jesus, he wants money for it. The infamous thirty pieces of silver he received may have been a down payment, with more to come after the deed was done.

Judas may have had other motives, but he was greedy, for sure.

We don't glorify greed; we believe it to be a bad quality. But do we understand how very bad it is? It is no minor sin.

Mar 14:11 And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him.

They had a man inside, deep under cover. *Except that Jesus knew about it.* The disciples didn't know; but Jesus did.

Don't think, however, that Judas was predestined to betray the Lord from eternity past. Don't think that he was predestined for Hell. As the story unfolds, the Gospels show that Jesus gave Judas space to repent.

If Judas had repented, God would have fulfilled the prophecies about his betrayal another way. We call the other way God's providence.

How can I say that with confidence? I say it on account of the glimpse we get of God's providence in the Old Testament book of Esther.

Esther was the queen in Persia just when a wicked anti-Semite named Haman convinced the king to issue a decree that the Jews be exterminated throughout the kingdom. Esther's uncle, Mordecai, wanted Esther to go before the king, in order to beg for the lives of the Jews.

But there was a problem; two problems, actually:

1. The king didn't know Esther is a Jew; she had kept it hidden from him.
2. To add to her dilemma, if you went before the king without an invite, he might execute you; and it had been quite some time since Esther had been invited.

Mordecai was unmoved by Esther's dilemma. He said to his niece, "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

It seemed to be Esther's destiny. In the context of what we are illustrating, you might say she was predestined to go before the king and save her people.

But if you read the story carefully, you'll see that she had a real, free will decision to make. She could have refused.

What would have happened if Esther refused? Mordecai tells us:

Est 4:14 "For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place..."

God seemed to have provided Esther an opportune moment. But, if she chose otherwise, God would have provided deliverance for His people some other way.

Judas could have repented. He did not, and, instead, is infamous for betraying Jesus just as Jesus was about to die for Judas' sins.

The aroma in that room was, for Judas, death.

You and I are the smell of death to those who are perishing. **That can be a good thing.** Here's what I mean.

Sometimes a bad smell can be a good thing. Natural gas is odorless, but they add a substance called *mercaptan* so you can detect potentially fatal gas leaks. It's the smell of death that leads you to life.

If you are a Christian, you smell like Jesus. Too much time out in the world will interfere with the aroma of Jesus, causing you to stink. That's why Jesus will wash the feet of His disciples - to symbolize the daily defilement of being in the world.

Sin has a stink of its own. It certainly overpowers the aroma of Christ coming from your life. But you can be washed again-and-again by the blood of Jesus, shed on the Cross to forgive your sins.

Day-in and day-out, know that your aroma of Christ can fill a room, leading those nonbelievers in proximity to have to confront their own mortality and eternity. Give them a whiff!

#2 Doing What You Can For Jesus Is The Fragrance Of Eternal Life Among Those Who Are Saved

(v3-9)

In most walks of life, we admire and applaud a person who is totally dedicated to their pursuit. In fact, we expect them to go far beyond what would be considered average or normal.

But when a believer in Jesus Christ expresses wholehearted devotion, even Christians tend to scoff. We label that Christian a fanatic, and urge them to dial it back a few notches.

Mary went full-fanatic, and we see the reactions of her peers.

Mar 14:3 And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.

First of all, you couldn't dine with lepers. Jewish law forbade it.

Second of all, *Jesus never met a leper that He didn't heal.*

This guy must be Simon the *former* leper. I think he kept the designation "the leper" to emphasize the healing Jesus had performed upon him. It was his testimony.

Plus, it was something he could have fun with. Imagine meeting him, and having him introduce himself as Simon the leper. Freaky.

Some of us could have a designation, could we not? Gene the drunkard; Pam the pothead. You get the idea.

The "woman" was Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. We know that from the other Gospels.

We see her always as Mary the worshipper, as opposed to her sister, Martha the worker, because of a dinner recorded in the Gospels when Martha complained her sister wasn't helping her.

Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better part, by sitting under His teaching.

It doesn't mean worship always trumps work. In the Thessalonians letters, the apostle Paul has to rebuke believers who have quit working to wait for Jesus to return. He says, at one point, if they won't work, don't feed them.

There's a time for work, and there's a time for worship.

"Oil of spikenard" came from India. It was "costly," "three hundred denarii" (v5). It was worth a workingman's wages for an entire year.

This wasn't something Mary went out and bought that afternoon. It was probably a family heirloom, probably her wedding dowry.

It was costly beyond money. It was precious to her on many levels - financially, emotionally, psychologically, socially.

She "poured it on" Jesus' head, all of it.

I'd be the first disciple to say, "Weird!" But that's because I'm not always sensitive to something more spiritual going on, below the surface.

Mar 14:4 But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted?
Mar 14:5 For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they criticized her sharply.

As mentioned, Judas led the criticism, because he was a thief. But it's clear the other eleven disciples shared his indignation.

Their criticism was logical, and you might even say it was spiritual in that they were thinking about the poor. But, as we will see, they were wrong on every level.

Being a Christian doesn't mean logic must be set aside, except that sometimes, *logic must be set aside!*

If everything you do as a believer, while serving God, makes perfect sense, and is arrived at by careful planning, then you're probably not hearing from God.

God told Abram to leave his home. He didn't tell him where he was going. He walked by faith, and though we now admire him, had we encountered Abram in his early days, we would have thought him to be a fanatic.

At one point God renamed him Abraham, which means *father of many, or multitude*.

Can you imagine Abraham meeting new people? "So, you're the father of many; how many kids do you have, anyway?"

For a long time, the answer was, "None." Then it was "One."

There are moments when logic must be set aside in favor of the obedience of faith. I can't tell you when those moments happen in your life. But they must, if you're following Jesus.

Mar 14:6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me.

The disciples must have had a lot of "that moment," moments. This one was, "**that moment** when you misinterpret someone's worship for waste."

Rocky Balboa was big on reputation. "They don't remember you," he counseled a troubled teen; "they remember the rep."

Mary had a rep for worship. The boys shouldn't have been surprised by her extravagance. In fact, they ought to have been wondering what she was going to do.

What is your spiritual rep? If you don't have one; or if it's not a good one; there's still time.

We should make it a goal to not "trouble" other believers. There are times for teaching and admonishing, for correcting and rebuking. What I'm talking about here is something different, where through your insensitivity you say things that trouble someone for no good reason.

Mar 14:7 For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always.

I don't want to get too far off topic, but I find this conclusion about "the poor with [us] always" very insightful. It establishes that believers are not going to create a utopia on earth. The entire time Jesus is absent from the earth will be marked by hardship and suffering.

Back to the dinner Jesus was enjoying... It seems Jesus was emphasizing priorities. At that moment, during His last days on earth, ministering to Him was a higher priority than feeding the poor.

Ask a Christian what his or her priorities are and you'll likely get this list, in this order: God... Spouse... Family... Job... Church.

We need, however, to quit understanding these as a list of descending importance and realize they are all, simultaneously, our top priority.

For example over the years I've had people tell me that they are making their family more of a priority, and the result will be that they won't be serving in the church anymore; or even attending very much.

(I've never had someone tell me that they are making their family more of a priority, and the result will be that they won't be going in to their job very much).

But you don't push one priority to the side in order to emphasize another. I remember part of a Bible study from Pastor Don McClure. He quoted the verse in Ephesians that tells us, as believers, to "walk circumspectly." He explained that "circumspectly" can mean, *in every direction at once*.

How can a person walk in every direction at once? You can't, at least physically. But you can, spiritually, as you are indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We have to stop thinking we can only have one priority at a time and walk circumspectly in all of them. In the Spirit, you can fire on all these cylinders at once; and you should.

"He who does not always have" has to be understood in the context of Jesus' promise after His resurrection that, by the Spirit, He will be with us always.

So what did He mean here? I think the answer to what He meant is in the next verse, where He tells us why Mary anointed Him with the spikenard.

Mar 14:8 She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial.

Jesus meant that He would only be with them, in His current incarnation, for a few more hours.

All of Jesus' followers had heard Him speak of His impending death. Only Mary really heard Him, and only Mary acted upon it.

How much she knew is questionable, but she must have figured that, if Jesus was crucified, there would be no time to properly anoint Him for burial. So, do it now.

It is a frequent complaint, and an emotional pain, that we wish we had said something, or done something, before a loved one's death. Mary did not want to have those regrets.

Mar 14:9 Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."

Here we are, more than two thousand years removed from this dinner, in Hanford, remembering Mary's act of worship.

Every now and then, someone astonished Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, a centurion comes to Jesus, asking Him to heal his sick servant. The centurion believes Jesus can do it by a word, without even seeing the sick servant. Jesus is said to have "marveled."

Here in our verses Jesus is obviously excited about what Mary has done.

You and I can make Jesus marvel. He can be excited about us. It doesn't have to be a great thing; just something genuine, from a heart of worship and adoration and belief.

One day, when we see Jesus face-to-face at His Reward Seat, He wants to marvel. He wants to excitedly say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

There is a phrase I want to return to, in verse eight, that forms the basis of our two points regarding this story. It is, "she did what she could."

How do you read that? Because there is a wrong way to read it, I think.

If we read it, "Well, she didn't do very much, but she did what she could," then I think that is wrong.

Mary did everything she could in light of the Lord's prediction that He was about to die. She was in a unique position to minister to Him; and she went the distance.

I'd venture to say that no one else in Jesus' immediate party had anything of any value with which to anoint Him for His burial.

Mary did. And she gladly, generously, did all she could. She didn't measure out a few drops, as a symbolic gesture. She broke the flask, giving it all in one act of extravagant worship.

If Mary had been like the other disciples, she might have turned to them, and complained. "Why am I the only one who needs to sacrifice? Why am I the only one stepping-up? Why don't you dip into the money bag and buy some anointing oil of your own?"

That way of thinking is a good way to ruin an act of worship, by the way.

It fell to Mary, who had the oil, the heirloom, the dowry; and she did what she could.

Each of us can do many similar things in service to the Lord. I'm suggesting there will be a time, or times, in your life when there is something only you can do.

Don't think that makes you indispensable; it doesn't. Remember Esther - If she refused to act, God would not be held hostage.

But it gave her the opportunity to do what she could. And we will have that opportunity; those opportunities. God is not a respecter of persons.

Jesus had told His disciples He was going to die. Mary did what she could about it.

Jesus has told us He is coming back for us, to resurrect the dead and to rapture the church, at any moment.

Talk to the Lord and discover what it is that you can do for Him in the light of His imminent return.

Then do it.