

Jesus Anointed with Extravagant Oil

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 61:1; Mark 14:3-9; JOHN 11:2, 12:1-8 (TEXT)

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In the early 1970s, when I was in college, a rock musical called “Jesus Christ Superstar” became a hit in Broadway and in the movies. It was the story of the struggle between two personalities in John’s gospel: Our Lord Jesus and Judas Iscariot. Also prominent in the play was Mary Magdalene, who was portrayed as a prostitute who fell in love with Jesus.

This horrible tale is based on the Gospel accounts of a woman pouring expensive perfume on Jesus during the last week of his earthly life. In Matthew 26:6-13 and in Mark 14:3-9, the woman is unidentified. In our text in John 11:2, 12:1-8, the woman is identified as Mary, the sister of Jesus’ friends Lazarus and Martha. In Luke 7:36-50, we find a similar story, but the time in Jesus’ ministry, the woman and her actions, the critics, and the response from Jesus are very different from the other three Gospels. The unidentified woman is described as one who has “many sins,” and Jesus later declared forgiveness of her sins. But this unidentified woman is not Mary Magdalene, but was a demon-possessed woman whom Jesus healed (Luke 8:2).

On his last week on earth, Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and afterwards disputed against the leaders of the Jews. Because he constantly confounded the Jews, they plotted all the more to arrest and kill him secretly. Their schemes are now coming to fruition with Judas, one belonging to Jesus’ inner circle of friends, as the point man. He himself approached the Jews secretly to betray him.

Perhaps the “last straw” for him was an event in Bethany, two miles from Jerusalem, where his friends Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, lived. In our text, it was now Wednesday, two days before the Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, when hundreds of thousands of Jews make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to join the celebrations. Jesus and his disciples were invited to dinner at a house, identified by Matthew and Mark as Simon the Leper. It is most likely that Simon the Leper was known in Bethany as a leper but was healed by Jesus, and as a result became a disciple.

While Jesus was eating with Simon, his disciples, Mary came with a very expensive alabaster flask of pure nard and poured it on his head. Nard is an aromatic oil extracted from the root of a rare plant in India or Arabia, and the amount in the flask (almost a pound according to John 12:3) could be sold for an equivalent of almost a year’s wages of an average worker.

What a waste! some of the disciples protested. It could have been sold and the money given to the poor. John reports in his Gospel that Judas Iscariot was the leader of the complainers (John 12:4-6). But Jesus cautioned the disciples to let the woman be, saying that she had done to him “*a beautiful thing*” (Matt 26:10; Mark 14:6). And Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, added that the poor will always be with them, while he will only be with them for a few more days.

What was “beautiful” in the woman’s action? It was her total devotion to Jesus (Luke 10:39; John 11:28-32) in anointing him with the most expensive oil she possessed, not knowing that

she was preparing Jesus for his burial. And his sufferings, death and burial are only the beginning of the completion of his threefold office as our Prophet, Priest and King. In the Old Testament, no one man fulfilled all three offices. Moses and Samuel were prophet-priests. David was a prophet-king, declaring the word of God and ruling over his people. Jesus is the only one who fulfills and makes perfect all three offices in one person.

Today, we will consider the anointing of Jesus with extravagant oil by the woman because he was ordained by God in his threefold office as: first, **The Great High Priest**; second, **The Eternal King**; and third, **The Better Prophet**.

The Great High Priest

Jesus told his disciples that Mary's action was of pure gratitude and devotion to him. She wanted to show her deep thankfulness to him for raising her brother from the grave. She was grateful that Jesus taught her family the true gospel. Like the poor widow who gave everything she had – a penny – Mary gave all her treasure stored in that alabaster flask. But more importantly, her action prepared Jesus for his burial.

As was customary in those days, the dead were anointed with oil and spices before their burial. After his crucifixion, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and anointed with myrrh, aloes, ointments and other spices before he was buried (Luke 23:56; John 19:39-40). So the anointing of Jesus by the woman served as a sign of his own death and burial that he had predicted before he came to Jerusalem.

In the Old Testament, priests were ordained by anointing them with holy oil, as when Aaron and his sons were ordained by God, *"You shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons"* (Exo 29:7, 9; 30:30). In Psalm 113:4 *the precious oil* extravagantly poured on Aaron's head when he was ordained as high priest signified the unity of God's people under him.

In his death and burial, Jesus accomplished his high priestly work. So in anointing Jesus, the woman was unknowingly preparing him for his office as our High Priest. All priests were to be from the family of Aaron and ordained by God to serve him. Since Jesus was not from Aaron's family, Question 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism has the answer. Christ became our High Priest not through blood descent from Aaron, but he was chosen, appointed and sent by God. Jesus as our High Priest fulfilled all of the Old Testament animal sacrifices in his once-for-all bloody sacrifice of his own body on the cross. As the sacrifice for the redemption of sin, Jesus had to live a perfectly righteous life, just as the animal sacrifices had to be without spot or blemish, *"holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners"* (Heb 7:26).

Not only does Jesus qualify as our High Priest because of his perfect righteousness. He also qualifies because he became one of us, *"one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15). And because he was also like us in all things except for sin, he is the only One who qualifies to be our Intercessor, Mediator and Advocate (Rom 8:34; 1 Tim 2:5; 1 John 2:1). Therefore, we have confidence that he hears our groans and petitions. We have joy that God is pleased with our praises and thanksgiving because they are offered through him.

The Eternal King

All of Israel's kings were anointed with oil at their appointment by God, as we see in Psalm 45, a psalm celebrating the coronation of their king, "*God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions*" (Psa 45:7). King Saul (1 Sam 10:1) and King David (1 Sam 16:13) were both anointed with oil by Samuel. When did Jesus become our Eternal King? The prophet Daniel saw in his night visions his enthronement as King when he ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of God the Father 500 years before this glorious coronation, "*And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion* (Dan 7:13-14).

But even as he entered Jerusalem before he was crucified, the Jews were ready to proclaim him King of Israel (Mk 11:10). However, they were looking for an earthly kingdom, not the heavenly kingdom that Jesus inaugurated when he first came and preached repentance and faith to enter his kingdom. When he preached the gospel, performed miracles, and cast out demons, it was to confirm that he had begun building his kingdom (Matt 12:28).

His anointing with precious oil by the woman signified not only his preparation for the office of High Priest, but for his coronation as Eternal King. This is why the Heidelberg Catechism says that the name of Christ also means that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit to be our eternal king (HC 31).

Today as the King of the kingdom of God, he helps the church in two ways. First, he continues to be Ruler over all things (Matt 28:18; Col 1:20), King of kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 17:14, 19:16), working all things for the good of the church (Rom 8:28). For our own sake, he reigns over the church (Col 1:18) and rules over her by his Word and Spirit (Matt 28:19-20). He has given us his Word, which are the laws that govern his kingdom (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Second, he leads us in our war against spiritual darkness. He defends and preserves us from our enemies, sometimes from physical danger, but at all times from spiritual forces of evil. In our war against Satan's kingdom, Christ equips us with all the weapons we need: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit. All of these are based on his holy Word (Eph 6:14-17).

And as he awaits the day of his coming, Christ allows the kings of the earth to oppose and plot against him and his church, persecuting and even killing his beloved people. But on the day of his coming, he will pour out his terrible wrath upon his enemies so that they would rather die than face his judgment (Rev 6:16-17). He will make them his footstool under his feet (Heb 10:13). Christian, be comforted when all around you, all around the world, Christ's enemies continue their wicked schemes to destroy you and all Christians. His day of vengeance will soon come.

But on that same day of vengeance, he will also bring to completion the good work that he has begun in you (Phil 1:6). This is our great comfort and assurance. He rules over us with his Word. He preserves and defends us with his Spirit. So do not doubt your salvation. Do not

doubt your security in this salvation. For Christ is in heaven, always interceding for us, always defending us from the temptations and attacks of our enemy.

What about Mary “wasting” a year's worth of wages to anoint Jesus? This brings us to our day when many false preachers tell their gullible followers that they are worth the million-dollar mansions, Rolls Royces, private jets, and air-conditioned doghouses because God's servants deserve to be rich and have the best. What about those ostentatious cathedrals and church buildings? Martin Luther was outraged when Rome extorted indulgences from the people to pay for the repairs of St. Peter's Basilica. In 1980, televangelist Robert Schuller completed Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, a building made of reflective glass panes, for \$18 million. When his ministry failed, the Catholic Diocese of Orange bought it for \$54 million.

What can we say about these things? Did not King Solomon build an ostentatious temple? Yes and no. The Jerusalem temple was a magnificent, ornate, gold-clad building. But God did not build it on the people's back. He made Israel one of the most powerful and richest nations on earth under Solomon. It is a display of God's majesty and glory, but it is only a foretaste of the greater Temple: Christ and his Church. God does not live in temples made with hands.

So then, are we going to be content with a lousy church building so we can help the poor instead? What about those who have a pure motive of giving glory and honor to God by building an aesthetically pleasing sanctuary? Are God's people not allowed to build a sanctuary which would be a token of God's glory? This is a pure motive. But this desire can also be abused in pursuing extravagance at the expense of the ministry to the poor, the homeless, the widow, and the fatherless. Moderation and balance are always good principles.

Must we use our gifts and talents to the utmost, for God's glory? Yes, and even the ministry to the poor is for God's glory. Must we have a beautiful sanctuary where we can worship God in splendor and beauty, “*Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary*” (Psa 96:6)? Must we come to the worship service in our best garments? Yes, whether it is a modest dress pants and shirt, or a nice suit. But again, all in moderation, not in ostentatious display. Mary glorified God by spending all her savings to honor Jesus with expensive nard, but so did the poor widow who gave all that she had: a penny.

The Better Prophet

When word spread throughout Bethany and Judea that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, “*many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus*” (John 12:9-11). The chief priests were losing their following. In verse 19, the Pharisees were so exasperated seeing the multitudes that followed Jesus that they said, “*the world has gone after him.*”

This was just a token of the following that Jesus will have after he was anointed by Mary for his burial. So he prophesied, “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*” (John 12:32). After he is lifted up on the cross, he will draw *all kinds* of people in the world to believe in him. How? His gospel will be preached everywhere by his disciples to the four corners of the earth to the end of the age. Those who had heard him and witnessed the miracles he performed perceived him as a prophet from God. The great prophet Moses

himself foretold of the coming of Christ, the greater Prophet whom God would raise up from Israel (Deu 18:15; Acts 3:22-23).

Many centuries later, Jesus came calling himself a prophet (Luke 13:33) who speaks with authority only his Father's words (John 12:49-50). Jesus not only prophesied the future; he authenticated his words with signs and wonders (John 6:14; Heb 2:3-4). This is why after God's holy Word was completely revealed by Jesus to the apostles and handed down to us through their writings, there is no more need for miracles to give authority to Scripture. Everything that man needs for salvation and eternal life are to be found in his Word (2 Tim 3:16).

Old Testament prophets, like the high priests and kings, were anointed by God. Prophets not only foretold the future, but also revealed God's to the people, his blessings and curses, and called for faith and repentance among the people. Jews considered Moses as their greatest prophet, but Hebrews 3:1-7 says that Jesus is a better prophet than Moses, "*For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses.*" When he preached and performed many signs, many Jews thought of Jesus as the Prophet foretold by Moses (John 6:14; 7:40; Deu 18:18-20). He confirmed that he is the Great Prophet when he declared in Luke 4:17-21, "*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me*" (Isa 61:1; see also 11:2). At Jesus' baptism by John, this prophecy was fulfilled when the disciples saw the Spirit of God descended like a dove, resting on his head (Matt 3:16-17). As the Heidelberg Catechism summarizes, Christ is "our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption." Jesus was anointed by the Spirit to be the Great Prophet.

In these last days after he ascended into heaven, Jesus continues his prophetic work through the ministers of the gospel whom he endows with his Spirit. And he sends the Holy Spirit to those whom he wants to save to give them a new heart in order that they would repent and believe. So he enjoins men of God, "Preach the word!" Preach only Christ and him crucified and resurrected! Preach the true gospel alone!" With the preached Word and the illumination of the Spirit, Christ accomplishes the redemption of all his people from slavery to sin. Preaching the gospel, not any gimmick or entertainment, is the only means by which the Holy Spirit creates faith in the hearts of his people in order to save them.

We are to listen to Christ only through his Word available and open to our eyes and ears. Nothing should be added to, or subtracted, from it. It is sufficient for our salvation, for our knowledge of God, for our life as a Christian, and for our comfort in times of need.

At the beginning of the worship service, we heard God's greeting from Revelation 1:4-5. Here, we heard God declare Jesus as "*the faithful witness [the Great Prophet], the firstborn of the dead [the Great High Priest], and the ruler of kings on earth [the Eternal King].*" When Mary anointed Jesus with extravagant oil, she was unknowingly preparing him for his death and burial. In his life, Jesus fulfilled his office as the Great Prophet. In his death for his people's sins, Jesus fulfilled his office as the Great High Priest. And after his resurrection, he was enthroned as the Eternal King.

Jesus as our perfect Prophet, Priest and King gives us comfort, strength and assurance. Jesus as our High Priest has done everything for our salvation. He is now interceding for us before our Father in heaven because as a Man, he is one of us and knows all our needs.

Jesus our Eternal King rules over the church so that everything is done with decency and order. He also defends and preserves the church against all evil spiritual forces. As the church assaults Satan's kingdom, the gates of hell will never prevail against us!

Jesus our True Prophet continues to preach to us and teach us in our pilgrimage in this world through his faithful servants in the church. He continues to preach the way of salvation to unbelievers so that the Kingdom of God may expand and be completed.

And when the number of the elect is complete, he will come again as our great Priest, King and Prophet to complete his work of salvation. Amen.