

The Preparation for the Burial of Jesus
Matthew 26:6-13
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The account of the anointing of Jesus with perfume in Matthew 26:6-13 is found also in Mark 14:3-9 and in John 12:1-8. However, in John 12, the timing of this event was on the Saturday before the Passover, "*Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany*" (John 12:1). This apparent problem of when this story happened is resolved by comparing how each Gospel described the timing. Only John gave a specific timeframe of "*six days before the Passover.*" Matthew and Mark only described the setting generally with "*Now when Jesus was in Bethany*" (26:6; cf. Mark 14:3).

We should then conclude that Matthew and Mark thematically placed this story of the anointing of Jesus with perfume, rather than chronologically. This took place when Jesus first arrived in Bethany. It was placed by Matthew after the prediction by Jesus of His death and the plot by the chief priests and elders to kill Him in order to contrast the evil deeds of the religious leaders of the Jews with the loving worship by the woman.

Luke 7:36-39 provides a similar account of the anointing of Jesus with perfume, "*Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.'*" However, this is not the same event as Matthew 26:6-13 due to the notable differences:

1. Simon the leper hosts Jesus in Matthew 26, and he was not a Pharisee (Luke 7:36).
2. Bethany is in Judea, while the account in Luke 7 occurred in Galilee.
3. The disciples criticize the woman in Matthew, rather than the host in Luke.
4. According to John 12:3, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, poured the perfume, while Luke described the woman as simply "a sinner" (Luke 7:37).

The basic similarity between Luke and the other Gospels is the name “Simon” (Luke 7:40), which is a common New Testament name, and the woman using perfume on Jesus. The differences are significant enough to confidently conclude that there were two separate incidents where a woman anointed Jesus with perfume, in somewhat different ways.

The service by the woman (26:6-7)

We know from Matthew and Mark that this occasion took place “*at the home of Simon the leper.*” There are at least eight different people in the New Testament named Simon, and this Simon must have been healed by Jesus of his leprosy sometime prior to the invitation. No one with an active case of leprosy would have hosted such a gathering at their home, for it would have caused all who attended to be in violation of the Law of Moses (cf. Leviticus 13:46). This invitation to Jesus was an expression of gratefulness for his deliverance.

From John 12 we learn that Simon also invited three siblings, fellow citizens of Bethany, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, to his home. Since John does not mention Simon as the host, some have speculated that Simon was their father. However, John does not say these siblings hosted Jesus either, but only that they were there. While Martha served the meal and Lazarus reclined at the table, Mary “*took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*” (John 12:3).

Some type of bestowal of honor might have been customarily practiced at times for any distinguished rabbi of the day, even anointing him with perfume. But what the Gospels stress was the value of the perfume, more than the act of anointing. The “*very costly perfume*” was worth “*over three hundred denarii,*” according to Mark 14:5 (cf. John 12:5). At the wage of one denarius for one day’s work, this would equal roughly one year’s salary for the typical laborer of the day. Even today, the most expensive perfumes have sold for over one million dollars.

The “*alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard*” was likely a syrupy liquid from the nard plant of India in a vial made of a translucent stone. The thick liquid could be accessed by breaking the neck of the vial (cf. Mark 14:3), which only added to the great cost of Mary’s act. This great honor that Mary bestowed was a great sacrifice in worship of Jesus. She poured the perfume on both the head of Jesus (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3) and on his feet (John 12:3), where she wiped it “*with her hair.*”

The scrutiny by the disciples (26:8-9)

The response of the disciples to Mary's act of worship was indignation. They considered the extremely valuable resource to have been wasted by her. They then supported their perspective with an apparently noble reason, *"For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor."* However, there was a greater purpose for such perfume than what the disciples' suggested.

This was considered wasteful by the disciples not only because of the cost of the perfume but also because of how much was used. That Mary *"broke the vial"* (Mark 14:3) and poured out the perfume shows that she didn't just use a normal amount for the scent, but she poured out the entire amount, destroying the vial in the process. Mary could have performed an act of high respect without going to such an extreme.

John 12:4-5 specifies that the person who spoke the words about selling the perfume for a high price and giving the proceeds to the poor was Judas Iscariot. Mark 14:4 describes this as a conversation among the disciples, *"some were indignantly remarking to one another."* That this comment was not made to Jesus, but only among the disciples, is supported by Matthew 26:10, *"But Jesus, aware of this."* Therefore, we can reasonably conclude that Judas was the person who spoke those words to his fellow disciples, and some of those disciples were in support of his perspective.

John 12:6 informs us of the motive of Judas, *"Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it."* Judas saw this perfume as a means of sordid gain, for if it was indeed sold for a high price, the money could be pilfered by him. Therefore, he would have preferred the perfume be sold for money and saw an opportunity to gain for himself vanish by this act by Mary. Perhaps this family had other resources that could have been liquidated to provide money to the poor? If so, Judas may have made the unrighteous criticism in order to give himself future opportunities to pilfer money.

Obviously, this motive was unique to Judas, but Judas was persuasive. This shows how one person's agenda can be packaged in a way that sways others, who are sincere in their faith, to support them in their contentions. We must not be deluded by the earthly perspectives of those who are self-serving, and yet influential.

Notably, Mary's other act of service to Jesus also faced criticism. *"Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:38-42).* Such service to our Lord is at times criticized by those who fail to have an eternal value system.

The summary by Jesus (26:10-13)

Exactly how Jesus became aware of the conversation of His disciples is unclear, but it may be that He overheard them, or that He knew their hearts. Nevertheless, Jesus considered their objection to what Mary had done to be a bother to her. This presumes she was aware of what was being said. Jesus corrected the critics by declaring that *"she has done a good deed to Me."* What they considered to be bad, Jesus called good. Therefore, this act did not *"waste"* this expensive perfume, but was a good deed.

Indeed, by saying *"For she has done a good deed to Me,"* Jesus made a statement about Himself. He was deserving of such lavish and expensive outpouring of love and resources. He validated Mary's act of worship in His defense of her.

Jesus then added the reason why what she did was good, *"For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me."* There would always be ample poor people to help, but Jesus was approaching the last week of His incarnation. No longer would anyone be able to worship Him in this way ever again. Mary seized a special opportunity.

This obviously was not a statement to diminish the need to help the poor. Jesus had just described those who would enter the kingdom of heaven as being characterized by care for His brothers in need, *"For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me"* (Matthew 25:35-36). The needs of the poor have existed abundantly ever since Jesus spoke these words, but we ought to help those who are in genuine need, particularly those of the household of faith (cf. Galatians 6:10).

Furthermore, Jesus' phrasing of His statement alludes to Deuteronomy 15:11, "*For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'*" The point of Deuteronomy 15:11 is not that there is an inevitability to the inequitable distribution of resources in the land but rather the people of Israel ought to care for the needy in light of the persistent presence.

Jesus then explained what Mary was in effect doing, "*For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial.*" Mary was very likely not intending to prepare Jesus for His burial, since she probably had no greater sense of what was impending than the disciples did. Yet her noble act did indeed serve this purpose. And of course, our Lord's purpose in His death was to serve all men, and certainly the poor, with the blessing of forgiveness of sin, which is worth immeasurably more than the perfume.

In this statement about His burial He once again reminded His disciples of His destiny. The frequency of these words increased as the time of His crucifixion approached. The fact that He would be buried ought not be glossed over, for without a burial, there would be no resurrection, only a resuscitation. Furthermore, His burial would prove to the world that He did in fact die, thus validating His resurrection from the dead.

While Matthew does not tell us that Jesus' body would be anointed before being placed in the tomb, each of the other Gospels include this. "*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him*" (Mark 16:1; cf. Luke 24:1; John 19:38-40). Therefore, Mary's act of anointing the body of Jesus was a precursor to the anointing that was to come.

This service would not be forgotten, for "*wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.*" The manifestation of Jesus' promise of the memory of this act of service is not only seen by its inclusion in Matthew, Mark and John's Gospels, but it was so well known by the time John wrote his account that he would introduce Mary by referencing this anointing by her, "*Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick*" (John 11:1-2). He made this reference before he would record the story himself in John 12:1-8. Obviously, the knowledge of Mary's service was well-known among John's readers many decades later.

Note that it is not Mary who would be remembered but what she did would be spoken about, for Matthew did not even record her name. The Lord knows who does what, and personal recognition ought not be our motivation for service to Christ. What truly matters is what was done, not who gets the credit for the service.

By the term *“this gospel”* Jesus must have meant the good news of His coming as the Savior of the world, including His life, death and resurrection. It is in this sense that we refer to the first four books of the New Testament as “Gospels” (cf. Mark 1:1). Jesus again states that the truth of the King and His Kingdom will be known throughout *“the whole world”* (cf. Matthew 24:14), which He will send His disciples to proclaim in Matthew 28:19. Two thousand years after this act by Mary, we are reminded again of her sacrificial service to our Lord.

Conclusion

Matthew includes this account of the anointing of Jesus with perfume in between the account of the plot by chief priests to kill Jesus in order to highlight the great value of our Lord’s impending sacrifice. Matthew intentionally placed this story out of its chronological order as a contrast between the great act of worship by Mary and the great act of evil by the chief priests (Matthew 26:1-5) through Judas, the betrayer (Matthew 26:14-16). There are only two possible responses to Jesus, faith or unbelief, as Jesus said, *“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters”* (Matthew 12:30).

Even those who believed in Him and left everyone to follow Him (cf. Matthew 19:27) failed to grasp the significance of this moment in the life of Christ. The disciples were more concerned about the apparent waste of the very valuable perfume than they were about the momentous events that were transpiring around them. This then also contrasts the perception of Mary to worship Jesus with the obliviousness of the disciples. While she may not have understood what was transpiring any more than the disciples did, she certainly valued the opportunity to attend to Jesus over the monetary value of perfume.

Like Mary, we must prioritize the worship of our Lord above the things of this world. We cannot be true disciples of Jesus if we put anything or anyone above Him in any way (Luke 14:25-33). *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”* (Matthew 6:24). All our good deeds, even to the least of these (Matthew 25:31-46), must be *“a good deed to Me”* (Matthew 26:10).