

A MEMORIALIZED MINISTRY

Mark 14:3-9

The well-ordered home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the little town of Bethany was much to the liking of Christ. It was a home of true family love and one in which Christ was a welcome and frequent guest. There He always found relaxation and encouragement.

On Tuesday before the Lord Jesus Christ was put to death on Friday He went out to Bethany to spend the night in the home of His three friends. That evening a feast was given in His honor in the house of Simon, whom Christ had previously healed of leprosy. Our Lord was invited to this feast because He was loved and His presence was desired. This dinner party was given in His honor out of grateful love for what He had done for Simon in cleansing him of his leprosy.

Among those present at this dinner party were our Lord's disciples and close friends. One whose presence must have added much to the warmth and joy of this occasion was hard-working Martha. Even though it was not in her home, Martha was in charge of the dinner and was doing the serving, which was the very kind of thing she enjoyed. Instead of sending to Jerusalem for a caterer, Simon had wisely secured Martha, his own good friend and also the devoted friend of Christ to render this service. So, she was doing what she enjoyed and could do the best. Another who was present was Lazarus whom Christ had raised from the dead a short while before. Lazarus was filled with awe and gratitude for his having been loosed from the bonds of death at the command of Christ.

Present also on this memorable occasion was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary had been very close to Christ. Often and intimately she had talked with Him in her home. Mary had sat at Christ's feet and had heard His words of grace and truth which had meant so much to her. Christ had been with her in the deepest sorrow of her life, the death of her only brother; and, marvelous to say, He had raised Lazarus from the dead and had restored him to his place in the Bethany home. There was such a warmth of gratitude and love in Mary's heart that she felt that she never could do anything for the Lord that would express adequately her heart-felt gratitude for all His goodness and kindness to her. Having been told that her Lord would be put to death, her keen intuition convinced her that this was the last opportunity she would have to express her great love for Him.

Mary possessed an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard which was one pound in weight and very expensive in cost. Whether she had procured it from a merchant or it had been bequeathed to her we do not know. Whether she had treasured it for a longer or shorter time we cannot say. It may have been very precious to her for sentimental reasons as well as very costly in terms of purchase. At any rate, there were four choices open to Mary in her use of it. First, she could have used it entirely on herself. This is exactly what many do with the alabaster boxes of their hearts and lives. Second, she could have poured it on some loved one or loved ones other than Christ. Third, she could have distributed it between herself and some other or others, either including or excluding Christ as a part-sharer. Fourth, she could devote it exclusively to her Lord, which was what she actually did.

While the meal progressed, Mary, not fearing what anybody would think or say, resorted to a device of her own planning to pay grateful homage to Christ. Disregarding the custom of her day that a woman should not enter a room where men were feasting except for the purpose of serving, Mary went into the presence of Christ, Who with the others was reclining at the table, and broke the seal of the alabaster box of precious ointment of spikenard and poured its contents on Christ's head and feet. Instead of trusting this unusual deed to somebody else Mary did it herself. Since Martha was serving at the feast, Mary could have requested her to anoint the Lord Jesus. Lazarus was at the table and would have been delighted to anoint Christ for Mary. But, this noble deed was so personal and sacred that she could not trust others to do it for her. She did it with her own hands.

Why did Mary do what she did for Christ Jesus? When she thus anointed her Lord she was not seeking to win the applause of the crowd. She was not striving for fame. She was not selfishly struggling to have herself remembered. Why then did she do it? There were various motives behind Mary's lovely impulse and noble deed.

1. There was reverence.

In her case there was no mere sentimental adoration of an idol. In His sublime manhood she had recognized incarnate Godhead. Therefore, she felt that she must worship Him. When she poured out that ointment on His head and feet it was to honor Him personally. Every drop of it was used out of reverence for His personality.

2. There was gratitude.

Mary was grateful to Christ beyond words to express for the restoration of her brother to life. There was no formal law requiring her to do what she did. She was not urged by any outward force to do it. Her action was spontaneous.

3. There was faith.

Mary had faith in Christ the Son of God as her Saviour and Lord. Her action was thoroughly original and winsomely individual.

4. There was love.

This was the strongest motive of all. Perhaps this ointment was the most valuable thing Mary had in worldly possessions. It was very costly, but she freely poured it out. Love delighted to lavish the best it could command upon the object of its affection. Piety is essentially generous and love is self-sacrificing. Mary did not stop to count the cost of what she was doing. She loved her Lord and her anointing of Him was an expression of her love for Him. It was a self-denying and sacrificial act. She did it without any talking about it either before or after.

It is not hard for us to do things for those whom we really love. Mary did it for Christ. What shall we say of our failure to do things for Him? Can we expect the world to think that we love Him when we do so little for Him?

Certain traits were exemplified by Mary which illustrate all true dedication to Christ. Lip-service was not enough; she must give. The cheap was not enough; she must give the costly. A part was not enough; she must give all. The unbroken was not enough; it must be outpoured.

What were the effects of what Mary did for Christ? As the fragrant odor of the perfume filled the dining room there was astonishment and indignation on the part of the disciples. The general feeling among them was that what she did was not in good taste. Murmurs of surprise and expressions of criticism were voiced by them. There were far more frowns than smiles, far more criticism than praise, and far more indignation than approval. However, the fault lay with those who complained about her gracious deed and not with Mary.

Judas did not have the slightest admiration for Mary's deed. He rather regarded it as an act of senseless extravagance. To him it was so much money thrown away; three hundred pence squandered for nothing. Judas, who meant every word of what he said, and the disciples who, perhaps thoughtlessly chimed in with him, thought they were far superior to Mary in business sense, but were really inferior to her in dedication to Christ.

In the eyes of the critics two things were wrong with Mary's gift. They said it was too costly for the use to which it was put and not charitable enough in the use which was made of it. In other words, it was too costly to be used for Christ and too costly not to be used for the poor. They simply branded it as an act of reckless extravagance and fantastic devotion. However, it should be remembered that nothing is wasted if it is done for Christ.

To Judas Mary's deed was reprehensible but to Christ it was beautiful. Upon hearing the harsh and unkind criticism of Mary, our Lord quickly defended her. Her service was criticized by men but praised by the Lord. She satisfied her Lord and that was enough. He commanded her critics to let her alone. He added that she had wrought a good work upon Him and that she had done the best that she could for Him. Thus He taught that one should be very careful about interfering with those who are serving Christ.

Christ's statement of appreciation, "She hath done what she could," compensated Mary for all the loss, all the humiliation and all the criticism which her deed called forth. What a peace came to Mary's mind when her act of worship was accepted with the assurance that her motives were understood and that her unique expression of devotion fitted in so perfectly with the emotions that were in His heart in view of all that He was to suffer in the immediate future. Her deed was memorable because it was prompted by love for Him. That broken box of spikenard exhaled a fragrance that sweetened the last days of His earthly life. Her high appreciation of Him encouraged Him greatly.

Nowhere do we find such strong praises bestowed on any person, who is mentioned in the Gospels, as Mary received from the lips of Christ. No stronger word of commendation could have been used than "She hath done what she could." Very few really deserve to have it said of them that they have done all that it was possible for them to do. Capacity is the measure of obligation. Beyond a doubt, Mary would have done more for Christ if she could have done so. By His very admission, her love was greater than her ability to express it. She did not try to do what somebody else could do, but only what she could do. That was all that Christ expected of her and it is all that He expects of any of us. Our Master will never ask us what we have done with what

somebody else had, but He will call us to account for what we have done with what we have had. Every one of us must give an account of himself to God.

What else did Christ say? He stated that Mary would be remembered for what she had done. The ministry of Mary was a memorialized one that will never die because it is tied to the gospel of Christ and makes her a partner with Him. She has been dead for centuries but her deed still lives to emphasize the death of Christ and the anointing of His body for death until it shall rise from the grave and be the pattern of the resurrected bodies of all the redeemed.

The odor that filled the house that day was soon dissipated, but Mary's deed is fragrant forever. "Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." It was an immortal deed. Christ ordained that it should be spoken of forever as a memorial of Mary and an example to all who should come after her.

As Mary of Bethany gave her best for Christ, so should we give our very best for Him. Christ deserves the best of everything--the best hours of the day, the best years of our lives, the best words we can speak, the best songs we can sing, the best sermons we can preach and the best deeds we can do for Him, because He gave His best for us. If we will give Him our very best, we will certainly receive His appreciation and win His commendation. We, too, will be remembered for what we have done. It must have brought much joy to the heart of Mary when Christ told her that she would never be forgotten, and that the memory of her noble deed would last as long as the gospel of Christ. May God give us the love Mary had for her Lord and help us to show that love by doing what we can and all that we can for Him.