

Wednesday – Day of Anointing

John 12:1-8

Introduction

This event is found in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12-8 and it is the only event that occurred on that day. Some interpreters place this event on Tuesday, others on Thursday, and some even on Saturday before His Royal Entry into the city. Rationale for placement of the supper on Saturday is based on the statement in John 12:1, that says Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover, which would have been Saturday. Then the anointing is mentioned next. Matthew however places it after the Olivet Discourse, which happened on Tuesday, and says it was two days before the Passover. John was not giving a chronological overview of the last week, but a thematic one. Matthew pays more attention to chronology. Placement of this event anytime before Wednesday seems to place it at a premature point in the development of the Passion Week events. Some even suggest there were two suppers and two anointings, one on Saturday by Mary and one later on Tuesday or Wednesday by an anonymous woman, but this option seems highly unlikely.

Comparison of the text of Matthew 26:2, 6-13 with Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:1-8 strongly suggests it was on Wednesday. The statement in Matthew 26:2, "two days before the Passover" which normally began on Friday, would place this event on Wednesday evening in the home of Simon the Leper. The fact that Bethany was a small village suggests that Simon invited Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to join him. John 12:1 does not specify the day of the week when the supper and anointing took place. Matthew and Mark identify the location of the event as Simon the Leper's house, while John reports the anointing but does not identify the location, Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3; John 12:1. Only John gives us the identity of the woman who anointed Jesus. It should be no surprise that it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, John 12:3, who was devoted to Jesus. Luke alone tells us of the earlier time when Jesus came to their home and Mary devotedly sat listening to Jesus. Martha was left alone to serve the meal and rebuked her sister, but Jesus defended Mary, see Luke 10:38-42.

1. Mary Gave A Sacrificial Gift – She Offered Jesus A Most Precious Possession

- A Costly Gift - The gift was valued by Judas, see John 12:5, at 300 *denarii*, which was approximately a year's wages. This ointment was a rare gift made from a root called *spikenard*, also called *nard*, a fragrant oil from a plant that only grows in the Himalayas of India or Tibet. It was so rare that only kings could afford to own it. It was therefore very difficult to obtain (Mark 14:3; John 12:3, 5). Even if a person had 300 *denarii* of discretionary funds,

they probably would not be able to find this rare commodity. Herodotus lists it as a gift that was exchanged by kings. How Mary came to be in possession of such a rare and costly item we do not know. But it certainly was a worthy gift to give to Jesus.

- A Valued Perfume - This ointment was "very precious" and highly fragrant and celebrated in the Song of Solomon 1:12; 4:13, 14. Once a flask of this perfume was opened its fragrance filled the room. It was contained in a special bottle made of alabaster, a small flask of translucent stone used to store expensive oils and ointments, Matt 26:7. Mary was like David in giving a costly gift to honor Jesus. Remember the famous statement of David when Araunah the Jebusite offered to give him his threshing floor, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing," 2 Sam 24:24.
- An Unrestrained Gift - Suppose she had given a teaspoon full? Instead she broke the valuable stone jar called an *alabastron*, Greek *αλαβαστρον*, see Mark 14:3. By breaking it she indicated she intended to give all that she had with no provision to reserve any of the precious ointment. As once said of our men who died in battle, "All gave some, some gave all!"
- An Extravagant Gift - What about the poor? Judas saw only the lost value of the 300 *denarii* of spikenard. Those who hate to give, hate to see others give. So Judas lamented that it could have been sold and the money used to provide for the poor. Jesus answered that the poor would always be with us. "Poor" is a plural indicating that Jesus intended to refer to the less fortunate of any culture. John 14:6 indicates that Judas was not concerned for the poor but that he could have sold it for the year's wages and had more funds to embezzle. Mary shows us the extravagance of true love.
- Commendation of Jesus - She did what she could! - Mark 14:8. Matthew quotes Jesus saying, "She has done a good work for Me!" It is a wonderful reminder that all we can keep is what we give away Matt 16:24-27. Remember Jim Elliot who said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." Matthew and Mark say that she anointed Jesus' head, while John says she anointed His feet, suggesting it may have been both head and feet.

Lesson: Jesus has some strange objects in His treasure house including a widow's mite, a cup of water, five small loaves of bread and two fish, and a broken jar of ointment. Note that the value of the gift was determined by the motive of the giver. Has He anything of yours? Have you ever done something extravagant for Jesus?

2. **Mary Gave An Unpretentious Gift - Designed for God, Not for the Audience**

- A Gift of Humility - This was an act of love from Mary to Jesus. She did not do this for any notoriety or acclaim. She did nothing to call attention to

herself. She was carrying out an act of humility and hospitality by washing the feet of Jesus. But she went a step further and anointed Him with this ointment. God honors an unpretentious and quiet spirit, 1 Pet 3:4.

- A Gift of Kindness - This was not an impulsive gift, but one given after careful consideration and much preparation. Jesus had already spoken of His coming death, burial, and resurrection. She had listened and resolved to honor Him with her gift.
- A Gift that Disregarded Criticism - She made no apology. In fact it is amazing that we have not one recorded word from Mary in the record of this act. She did not defend her gift to her critics. She did not brag about what she had done. In the quietness of her humble spirit she came, she blessed Jesus, and she departed without a word.
- A Gift of Love and Devotion - John tells us that Martha was busy serving the guests and meeting their needs. Thus, her commitment shows the need for devotion to service. Lazarus also was present sitting with Jesus and shows us the need for hospitality. But Mary shows us the beautiful picture of devotion to Jesus. She loved Him because He first loved her, and us, 1 John 4:19. He was about to give Himself for Mary and all of us, Gal 2:20.

Lesson: God loves a cheerful giver, 2 Cor 9:6-8. God also loves a quiet and unpretentious giver, Mark 12:41-44. God loves a giver who gives with the right motive. God loves a giver who is neither concerned with the criticism nor praise of men, but who seeks to please Him.

3. Mary Gave A Symbolic Gift - The Gift Was More than the Ointment

- Anointing for Jesus - The rite of anointing is a sign of dedication. It was used to set apart a priest for service in the tabernacle or Temple, Lev 8:12. It was used to set apart a prophet for the ministry, 1 Kgs 19:16. It also was used to set apart one chosen to be a king, 1 Sam 10:1; 16:13. But all of these offices were symbolic of the coming Messiah, Ps 2:2, who was and is God's Priest, Prophet, and King. Even objects dedicated to God's service were anointed, such as the Tabernacle, Exod 30:26-28. At death, the body was anointed with aloes, myrrh, and perfume to prepare it for burial Mark 16:1; John 19:39. Mary anointed Jesus as her Messiah, Hebrew מְשִׁיחַ, meaning "anointed one," and Christ, Greek χριστός "anointed," but she also anointed Him for His burial, Matt 26:12; Mark 14:8; John 12:7.
- Giving First Place - Does Jesus get first place in your life when to do so is costly? Many give God the leftovers and are like the idolater of Isaiah 44:13-17, who grows trees, cuts them down for the fire to warm himself, cooks his food to feed himself, and the rest is used to fashion a god to worship and say, "Deliver me for you are my god!" Mary did not give the leftovers but showed that Jesus had first place in her devotion. She took

- her most precious possession and gave it to Jesus and in this way recognized Him as her Messiah and gave thanks to God for His indescribable gift!
- Representative Gift of Love - It is true that one's motive hallows everything as in Colossians 3:16-17, "Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all to the glory of God." Mary's gift was a statement of her love for God and her love for His only begotten son, Jesus. The ointment and alabaster container were a tangible gift that symbolically represented the love and devotion that Mary had for Jesus as her Messiah.
 - Right Priority - Mary had the same priority in her gift that the Christians at Corinth had in their giving to meet the needs of fellow believers. This is the basis of true giving in that Mary, along with the Corinthian believers, "first gave themselves," 2 Cor 8:1-5. She recognized that what God wants from us is not expensive gifts, but He wants our unrestrained commitment. In this way the ointment represented Mary to Jesus and to God the Father. She had her priority right in that she first gave herself, then she gave what she had to Jesus.

Lesson: The blessing of Mary's wonderful gift was multiplied fourfold. First, the giver, Mary, was blessed. Second, Jesus, the recipient, was blessed. Third, the church of that day was blessed by her act of love. Fourth, the church ever since has been blessed by Mary's example of love and devotion to Jesus.

4. **Mary Gave A Prophetic Gift**

- Mary's Gift Predicted Jesus' Sacrifice - She predicts the death and burial of Jesus, as Mark's Gospel states: ". . . She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial," Mark 14:6, 8; Matt 26:10,12; John 12:7. How much Mary understood about Jesus' statement regarding His impending crucifixion and the relationship of that to her act of devotion, we cannot know. We do know that the enemies of Jesus were aware of His predictions, and they were more than willing to try to accommodate Him. It is certainly not beyond reason that she indeed may have realized just how close He was to the cross. She may have considered this her last opportunity to bestow an act of kind devotion upon the Savior. This actually makes her deed all the more meaningful if her actual purpose was to anoint Him for His burial. Whether conscious or coincidental, Mary's act of devotion was a wonderful example of one who believed in Him and placed her faith and trust in His Word.
- Mary's Gift Previewed the Gospel - The heart of the Gospel is set forth clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (read). Mary enacted the Gospel event in her act of devotion and thus preached the Gospel of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and His burial just as surely as the prophetic word in Isaiah 53:9 which says, "And they made His grave with the wicked - but [also] with the rich at His death." Mary's was an identification with the gospel message of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection, Matt 26:13; Mark 14:9. The message of

salvation and the grateful response for our receiving salvation must never be separated. Mary was devoted to Jesus and her gift affirmed it.

- Mary's Gift Presents a Lofty Standard for Giving - Give your best to the Master. Her example sets the standard for the kind of service Christ will accept and the kind of service that truly honors Him, see e.g. 2 Cor 8:1-24 and 9:1-15. In his commentary on Matthew, Herschel Hobbs points out that doubtless both Judas and Mary knew that Jesus was about to die. Yet, the response of each was strikingly different. Judas' response, knowing that Jesus was about to die, was to salvage something for himself. His thought was, "What can Jesus do for me?" In contrast, Mary was saddened and looked for the best way to express her love for Jesus. Her thought was, "What can I do for Jesus?" Hobbs closes his discussion by stating:

This may be mere imagination on the part of the writer. But the end result in both cases is true nevertheless. For Mary did anoint Jesus for His burial. And Judas did betray Him into the hands of His enemies, Herschel Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965, pp. 363.

- Mary's Gift, Her Memorial - Jesus used the Greek word μνημόσυνον *mnemosunon*, in referring to Mary's gift, Matt 26:13. The word means a "memorial" as is used to refer to a tangible object that brings to mind a spiritual event, see e.g. Exod 13:9; 28:12; Lev 2:2; Josh 4:5-7; Acts 10:4. It should be noted that there were actually two memorials established at this time. First, Mary's memorial gift of love and devotion established as a matter of God's eternal record in her honor. Second, the other memorial is that of Judas. His treachery and greed made his name, "Judas," an eternal byword for deception and betrayal. This is his infamous memorial. Jesus further added on behalf of Mary, "Verily I say unto you, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, also what she has done shall be told in memory of her," Matt 26:13. Our lesson today is additional evidence of God's faithfulness to keep His promises. We pay tribute to Mary and take her offering as an example of extravagant and unselfish devotion to the Lord Jesus.

Lesson: What would be your attitude toward Jesus today? Is it the attitude of ingratitude that says, "What can you do for me, Jesus?" Or is yours an attitude of gratitude that says, "What can I do for you, Jesus?" Jesus wants you to respond to Him by faith so that His sacrifice for your sin will not have been in vain. All that we give to Christ continues working until He returns (Matt 26:13; Rev 14:13).