

Preparing for the Unthinkable

Mark 14:1-11

Seventy years ago, on April the 9th, a German pastor had a noose placed round his neck, and was waiting for the support beneath him to be removed, or him removed from it, that he might die. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he was thirty-nine years old, and he had tried to stop the murderous reign of Adolf Hitler. He had failed. And so, by trying to save the lives of others, he lost his own. It was his allegiance to Christ, instead of the Third Reich, that cost him his life.

But Bonhoeffer knew it would cost him that. On the platform, preparing to die, he felt no regrets. To him, Jesus was worth it.

Eight years earlier, as the Nazi's were growing in power, Bonhoeffer wrote his most well-known work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. And one day, as he was writing, these words marched resolutely from his pen. About eight years before his death, he writes:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call.

That is the cost of discipleship—that is the cost of following Jesus. And that is a cost that Bonhoeffer paid.

There are some who will see the price tag on the call of Jesus this morning, and will raise their eyebrows incredulously, think it unreasonably inflated, set it the object softly back down on the shelf and search out the discount rack for a less demanding path. We see that

individual rounding the corner to an easier aisle. And as we watch, I must lean over to you and ask: do you recognize that person? Is it you?

Oh, if it is, I beg you, return—take up the object one more time before you leave the store. Consider Jesus' call once more before you put your money into your pocket.

Say to yourself, "Yes, this is the most expensive thing I've ever seen, this following Jesus. And I can hardly bring myself to part with all I have to obtain it. *But*, I can't ignore that others are making the purchase. Others believe it is worth it. Look at this Bonheoffer—why does he buy it at so high a cost. Why are the martyrs all standing in the check-out line with this object in their hand?

"Why is Jim Elliot there, pouring his lifeblood into the Curaray River of Ecuador? Why are Latimer and Ridley there, giving their bodies like men to the Oxford flame? Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church—but why is there a persecuted church. Why do the modern sufferers and martyrs stand in line, all holding in one hand this object, and in the other the purchase price—their lives."

And when you gain the gusto to tap one of these courageous saints on the shoulder and ask, "Why are you buying that, if it costs so much?" Then you will hear the same words which the Apostle Paul spoke: "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish *so that I may gain Christ.*"

In the hand of every martyr and every true Christian is the pearl of great price, which is Jesus Christ himself, and for that pearl he or she is willing to give everything—even life.

So let me lay this question before you this morning, as the center of all we will consider in the minutes following. It is this: What is Jesus worth?

In our text today is one woman who stands in line, and she will show us by her devotion what Jesus is worth. She is not named in Mark, but we know from John's gospel that she is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She and those siblings are present at the house of a certain Simon, who once was a leper but was presumably healed, and most likely by Jesus' own touch. He lives in the same town as Mary and her siblings, in Bethany, a short distance east of Jerusalem. So at the table is Jesus, the twelve disciples nearest to him, Lazarus, and probably Simon,

their host. And as Jesus is at the table, Mary comes to him. Set your mind to discover what Mary thinks Jesus is worth.

Mark 14:1-11

The set up of this passage is unique, and this is why. The first and final parts, which speak of the plot against Jesus' life, take place apparently on Wednesday of Jesus' final week. On Friday Jesus will die, right as the eight-day festival known as the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread begins; and see what verse 1 says, "Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away." So as Jesus' enemies scheme against his life, in verses 1 and 2, and 10 and 11, it seems it is Wednesday.

But from the book of John we learn that the part in between, verses 3 to 9, the part about Mary, happened the Saturday before. This is no threat to our understanding of Scripture's inerrancy—the Bible does not err when it puts a Saturday happening between two Wednesday events. No, this was intentionally done, either by Mark the author, or by Peter, from whom Mark learned of the events.

And the question we must ask is, "Why has Peter, or Mark, chosen to set Saturday between two parts of Wednesday?"

And here is the answer: to better show us, by means of contrast, what Jesus is worth to Mary. Mark wants what Mary does for Jesus to sparkle in our eyes and so, like any good jeweler, he takes that diamond and brings it over to a piece of black cloth and sets it there. The Wednesday activities are dark and hateful, so when the bright and precious love of gentle Mary is placed upon them, it shines.

So then, I will try to match my message to the text, and obey the author's attempt to contrast Mary with those around her. In this way, the Spirit of God assisting us, we will better see Mary, and find her answer to this question of ours: "What is Jesus worth?"

Many say "He's not worth much"

So let us ask her, shall we? We approach Mary at the check-out line and present our query, "Mary, please tell us, what is Jesus worth?"

Not worth one's reputation

But before she can answer, she is stopped. A group of men press into the line and, with a stern, serious look, reply for her: "Listen, Jesus is not

worth much.” These are the leaders of Israel, members of the highest council, the Sanhedrin, and in our text are called, verse 1, the chief priests and the scribes. Well then, since they have pressed the issue, let us turn aside from Mary and lay our black backdrop down before we hear her answer.

See verses 1 and 2: “Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, ‘Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people.’”

Can you see the sad irony in this?

The chief priests bloodied their hands at the altar year after year, and would, two days after this event, let flow the blood of thousands of lambs in Jerusalem. And all of this was meant by God to drive into their minds one thought: “I have broken God’s Law—I need a spotless lamb to die for me.”

The scribes, on the other hand, were ever applying their minds to the Law of Moses, investigating even its minutest points. And God had given them this Law to drive into their minds one thought: “I have broken God’s Law—I need a spotless lamb to die for me.”

And after fifteen hundred years of making the point, God finally brought to them the long-awaited spotless Lamb. To which they said, “We’ll pass. He’s not worth it.”

Why do they not think Jesus worth their time and attention? What distracts their minds, what do they value more than him? This: their reputation.

The brilliant Sun of righteousness was shining in the sky, the final goal of each ritualistic offering and of every jot and tittle in the Torah—but the Jewish leaders preferred the shadows. Notice, in verse 1, that they were planning to “seize [Jesus] by stealth.” And the reason for their secrecy is given in verse 2: if they seized him openly during the festival, the great crowds who had travelled there for the Passover would riot.

And what is the problem with a riot? In John 11, they tell us: “If we let [Jesus] go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away...*our place*...”

Ah, so that’s it? Your place? Yes, their place. They held seats of honor, and held those seats with a grip that would not be loosened. So when

Jesus offered them his hand, but required that they humble themselves and share in his shame, that they let go of their own name to carry his, they said, “No Jesus, you’re not worth it. You’re not worth losing our reputations for.”

Friends, is this what keeps you from surrendering all to Jesus Christ this morning? Is your concern, “If I go all in, I will be regarded a religious fanatic. I have worked hard to earn my badges of honor; finally I am being recognized by my classmates, and my posts to social media are being liked; at last my coworkers respect me.”

If these words are yours, you are like the Samurai of old, who, when they were defeated in battle, or in any way lost their honor, would ritually kill themselves in an attempt to regain it. Jesus offers you terms of peace—do not kneel on the mat and kill your soul in order to maintain a false sense of reputation. Will you not reconsider the worth of Jesus, instead? He may just prove better than your reputation.

Not worth one’s money

With the religious leaders aside, we press our question again to the woman: “Mary, what is Jesus worth?” She prepares to speak and we prepare ourselves to listen—and she is interrupted again. One man steps between us and her, pushes us back and says, “Listen, Jesus is not worth much.” This is Judas.

Look at the other end of our text, verses 10 and 11: “Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time.”

The religious leaders were willing to trade Jesus for a good name; Judas was willing to trade Jesus for a good price. And that is what they promised him—thirty shekels of silver, enough to buy a field.

We learn from John’s account that Judas kept the money box for Jesus. And when it pleased him, Judas would reach his hand into that box and pilfer a few of the funds for himself. He was greedy, and he was a thief.

In fact, this is why some of the men attending the meal rebuke Mary for not selling her costly offering of perfume. Judas instigates the revolt, not because he cares about the poor, but because he wanted that money in the money box, in reach of his avaricious fingertips.

“Money,” Judas would tell us, “makes the world go round, not Jesus. Get as much of it as you can, any way you can. And as for Jesus, he’s not worth more than thirty shekels of it.” Behold, the marvelous price at which Jesus’ worth is estimated by men.

Is this, Benjamins and all they can buy you, what keeps you from Christ? If you could see yourself with spiritual eyes, you would notice the dark and vicious thorns that have grown up all around you and latched onto your skin, which are choking out the words I speak while they are yet on the surface of your ear. Your money may say, “In God we trust,” but it lies—in gold you trust. And nothing gold can stay. You have surrendered yourself to the subtleties of the American dream—and it is only a dream, which will flash away as soon as you awaken before the judgment seat of God. Will you not reconsider the worth of Jesus? He may just be better than dollar bills.

So then, the religious leaders don’t think Jesus worth their reputations, and Judas does not think him worth his wealth.

Mary says “Yes, he is”

And I do not think that Mary can keep silent any longer. The black backdrop is set, and the diamond must now speak. Jesus is regarded as worth less than reputation, less than money. But Mary, like the martyrs, is undeterred by these objections. “Mary,” we say, “please, tell us, what is Jesus really worth?”

Worth one’s reputation

And she replies, “Watch, and I will show you.”

So let’s watch, verse 3—it says “there *came* a woman.” So simple a phrase, yet this was a violation of etiquette—the men were dining, and a woman interrupts them. She cannot escape the critical gaze of those around the table, and she knows it. In view of the other gospel accounts, it seems that Mary first pours her unguent on Jesus’ head, then across his body to his feet. And once there, she breaks a second rule of etiquette, letting down her hair that with it she may wipe these feet.

Now look at the daggers which those dining drive into Mary’s reputation, verse 4: “Why has this perfume been wasted?” Ah, but Mary does not think it waste to give up her treasure for Jesus, nor to give up her reputation for him. She is doing a good deed for him.

See the contrast: the religious leaders acted privately to protect their reputations and positions—but Mary is not ashamed to break her bottle and fill the whole room with a fragrance that cannot be ignored. Like Esther she enters the presence of the King, despite the death her reputation may suffer at the hands of the others dining there. And it does suffer that death. But by that death, she says, “This is what Jesus is worth—more than my reputation.”

Mary reaches the register and gives her good name to the cashier. She has given it up for Jesus.

Worth one’s money

But there is more.

See what Mary’s offering is, later in verse 3: “an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard.” Nard, also known as spikenard, was an aromatic oil extracted from the root and leaf-like spikes of the spikenard plant. But this plant only grew in northern India. So if you wanted spikenard it had to be imported, and therefore it cost top dollar. That’s why it was kept in a secure case of marble.

We are told how much Mary’s perfume was worth—verse 5 says, “over three hundred denarii.” The typical worker of that time made a denarius a day. Mary’s perfume was worth a year’s wages, so that if we calculated that today based upon average income, her offering would have cost her about \$40,000, for this one bottle.

And bear in mind, women of that time could not find employment for a denarius a day. We imagine that Mary has received this as a gift, perhaps inherited it as an heirloom. It may have had for her an irreplaceable sentimental value—and it probably was irreplaceable, for she was unlikely to ever come across that sum of money again in her lifetime.

Yet when the diners complain, in verse 5, that the perfume should have been sold, and the proceeds given to the poor, Mary does not regret her deed. It is good and godly to give to the poor, but how could she think of the poor when God was seated on the other side of the wall? “[Y]ou always have the poor with you,” Jesus says in verse 7, “and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me.” Behold, someone greater than the poor is here, in this house. And Mary knew it.

So while Judas is willing to give up his Master for his money, Mary is willing to give up her money for her Master. She breaks the vial and empties all twelve ounces onto Jesus. She puts probably the whole of her wealth alongside her reputation on the cashier's counter. Like the lonely poor widow two chapters before, Mary has, according to verse 8, "done what she could." She surrenders up her net worth to Jesus. Her purse coughs its final cough and dies. But by that death, Mary says, "This is what Jesus is worth—more than all my money."

Why?

And so we end by asking, "Why? Why, Mary, are you and these many martyrs breaking your alabaster for Jesus? Why are so many willing to pay the cost of discipleship, be it ever so high? Why is Jesus worth so much to you? Why are you pouring your precious ointment over the Savior's head?"

And we might find her answer reflected in Jesus' words at verse 8: she was, whether she knew it or not, anointing him "for the burial." He loved her first, before she ever loved him, and he would seal that love very soon with his blood, in two days.

If we who love the Lord Jesus Christ must give an account for our love to inquirers, what can we do but sing them this God-ward prayer, written long ago by a boy not yet eighteen years of age: "I love Thee because Thou hast first loved me, and purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree."

We die for Jesus, because Jesus died for us.

How is it that Christians love their Lord with a love stronger than death? It is because our love grows like sunflowers in the open field, which respond to the sunbeams of Christ's love.

The Christian who has tasted the smallest part of Jesus' love for her can watch the rat race for human approval that transpires round about, can observe the chief priests and scribes of every age who are enthroned on the praises of men, and can happily turn away. She would just as soon kiss the flowers in the Valley of Humiliation, if that valley leads her nearer to Jesus and his love.

It is Jesus' love that moves our hand to break the alabaster vial that bears all our substance. We see him pouring out the contents of his heart upon the cross for us, and feel that, torn though he may be, he is lovelier than Solomon in all his splendor, and deserves to have all of our affections poured over his thorny head.

We see him laid lifeless in the sealed tomb, and covenant within ourselves that our heart shall be sealed in impenetrable rock, stored in marble until he is pleased to break it for his own use.

You strangers to the love of Christ, the love of Christ compels me to speak. Do you want to know what Jesus is worth? Jesus is worth the slander of a million tongues; he is worth the hatred of my nearest friends; he is worth the condescending look of coworkers and classmates; he is worth the final penny in my bank account; he is worth the devastation of my American dream; he is worth the cost of discipleship; he is worth the noose and the stake and the cross it will cost me to follow him. His love is better than love.

So now, Bonheoffer is still standing on his death plank, staring; Mary looks up with her broken, empty vase in hand; the martyrs of each continent for whom we pray turn from the line to look to you; and Jesus, maybe with the faint aroma of spikenard still in his blood-clotted hair, peers down from the cross of his anguish; and together they ask you this question, the same that I leave with:

“My friend, what is Jesus worth to you?”