

"As a Memorial"

I was reminded the other day on the radio that there will soon be a George W. Bush Presidential Library. Most of you are aware of the fact that after a president's term in office, our government creates a library and museum. This is essentially a sort of memorial to their presidency. It captures their presidency in history.

Of course in society, we have all sorts of memorials. Just go to a cemetery, and each of the gravestones is a memorial, of course. At any famous or historic place, we have statutes and monuments that serve as memorials.

And of course our lives, and the things we do, can leave a lasting memorial or legacy. And that's why I bring this up today. You see, as we look at this passage, we find Jesus in verse 9 talking about how this woman's actions would be memorialized. This woman's actions would leave a legacy. Jesus promised that her story would be told throughout the world. And as we think about this woman's legacy, I believe this passage calls us to consider our own lives. Will we leave a legacy to be remembered? If so, what will that look like? Jesus shows us in this passage how to live so as to leave a legacy.

As we look at this passage we are immediately confronted with two very different legacies. Mark again shows his mastery of the art of contrast. This beautiful story of the woman anointing Jesus is surrounded by a different story. Verses 1-2 and verses 10-11 are about a death plot. They are about the story of people trying to kill Jesus. But verses 3-9 interrupt that plot to bring us back to this beautiful scene of Jesus being anointed at Bethany by this woman. These are two very different stories, but Mark intersects them for us. And as he does that, we see that these stories are actually very much related. They both have Jesus' death in view. And in both we see a legacy being left.

In the first story, in the death plot, we see a bad legacy being left. In the first two verses, the focus is on the chief priests and scribes. In the last two verses, the focus is on Judas Iscariot. But both leave the same sort of legacy. Both denied the Christ and became the instruments for his death. Mark so artistically weaves these together. He wants us to see verses 1-2 and verses 10-11 as part of one united story. In the first two verses we see the chief priests and scribes are seeking something - to take Jesus by trickery or strategy. In the last two verses we see Judas Iscariot is also seeking something - seeking to conveniently betray Jesus. And so Mark connects verses 1-2 with verses 10-11 by this repeated word of seeking. They are both seeking, and they are both seeking Jesus' death.

And in the first two verses we see that the chief priests and scribes have a specific desire. They want to find a way to take Jesus in trickery. You see the Passover feast was upon them. The population in Jerusalem at that time would have swelled from normally around 50,000 to upwards of some 250,000 - people on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. There would have been a lot of people there, and many of these would have been Galileans, people who would probably have been most familiar with Jesus, and most supportive of him. If they didn't want any problems from the Romans, they had to find a way to get rid Jesus in a way that didn't upset the people. They conclude that this means that they had to wait until after the feast, even though they probably didn't want to wait that long.

But then along comes Judas. He proactively comes to the chief priests and volunteers to betray him (for a price obviously). And what's their response? They were glad! Verse 11. Of course they were. This probably seemed like perfect timing for them. They needed a way to discreetly get Jesus. They had just been plotting about that. And here comes Judas, one of Jesus' inner circle, ready to betray him. This probably seemed like answered prayer to him. They probably said, this can't be just coincidence! (By the way, this is a healthy reminder to us. We believe in God's providence. We know there isn't anything that's truly just coincidence. But sometimes, often, we can misinterpret providence. We can see something as not coincidence and then think God is telling us to do something that he isn't.) In this case, the chief priests might have incorrectly interpreted this as a providential opportunity to stop a blasphemer and heretic. In reality they were unjustly murdering the Messiah.

And in doing this, they would leave their mark on history. They have a lasting legacy and memorial. Judas betrayed not only his friend, but his Lord, to a death he didn't deserve. The chief priests and scribes, the people's religious leaders, led the people astray by killing the one whom they should have worshipped.

But Mark draws our attention away from their infamous legacy to see this woman and her act of adoration to Jesus. In verse 3, Mark draws us away from Jerusalem and the plot to kill Jesus and brings us to Bethany, the small village just outside of Jerusalem. Here this woman comes up to Jesus and does this good deed. She has this expensive bottle of perfume. In the original Greek in verse 3, it says that this is specifically *pure nard*. That probably means it's was the authentic stuff. You know, not imitation nard, but 100% unadulterated nard. This was basically some aromatic oil. It would have been kept in a sealed alabaster jar which you would have had to break open in order use it. That was done to preserve the oil's fragrance. Verse 3 tells us that this was very costly, and as we're told later, it was worth more than 300 hundred denarii. That would have been almost a year's worth of wages for an average laborer. And so this expensive perfume was probably a legacy in and of itself. It was probably a priceless family heirloom passed from mother to daughter.

But this woman decides to break open this expensive perfume and pour it on Jesus. This was probably a pretty festive time, with the Passover soon approaching. The people were probably already beginning to celebrate. This woman might have thought that this was a very fitting thing to do. She wanted to honor her Lord. She wanted to do something good to her master. She obviously had faith in Jesus and wanted to express that worship in a tangible way. At our Christmas Eve service we thought about the Magi and the costly gifts that they had brought to Jesus. That was fitting, as Jesus is the king of all kings, despite his humble birth in a manger. And so this was a very fitting thing for this woman to do.

But evidently some people didn't think so. According to the John's account of this event it seems that Judas Iscariot was particularly behind this uproar, but also some of the other disciples likely joined in. This poor woman. Here she makes this huge sacrifice and the disciples start instantly criticizing her. If this was some priceless family heirloom, you could imagine that you wouldn't just use it for any old reason. She had to have thought about this and said this is the right occasion and time. It's like a really expensive bottle of wine - you save it for just the right occasion. This was probably such a genuine expression of her heart that she couldn't wait to do this. She was probably all excited, maybe even a bit nervous in presenting such a special gift. She thought, oh this will please my Lord so much! And then as soon as she does this wonderful act of love, people all

around her start criticizing here. They say that she wasted such a beautiful gift on Jesus!

In fact it says that they even got angry. Verse 4 - they were indignant. Man, how sad for this poor woman. Here she puts her heart on the line in such a wonderful gift, and these disciples instantly turn on her and get angry with her. Man, how that could have spoiled the whole gift. Verse 5 shows their motivation. This could have been sold and the money given to the poor. It was actually a practice during that time during the Passover to make a special offering to the poor - kinda like how we take a diaconal offering during our communion service. And so you can sympathize a little bit with those who scolded the woman. God obviously calls us to give to the poor. Even Jesus had said to not store up treasures on earth. Obviously it's good to be concerned for the poor, especially during the time of the Passover. Of course we shouldn't read too much into their motivation either. In John's account of this event, were told that the reason Judas Iscariot was making such a big deal about this, was because he was in charge of taking care of the moneybag for the poor among the disciples, and he was stealing from it. Judas saw this as an opportunity to make a little extra money, evidently. That is, had the woman gave it to the disciples to sell and distribute to the poor.

But Jesus comes to the rescue of this woman. Verse 6. Right when the woman's spirit might have seemed crushed, after giving this wonderful gift only to be met with criticism, Jesus jumped in. He rebuked the disciples, telling them to leave her alone. She had not sinned. She hadn't even made a bad choice. Jesus commends her choice. He says that she has done a good thing for him. Jesus calls what she did a good work done unto him.

But Jesus doesn't just stop there in defending her. He then interprets her actions for them. Verse 8, "She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint my body for burial." Wow. That's quite an interpretation. Remember, this is just a few days before Jesus will taste death on the cross. This is just a few days before his body would lie dead in the tomb until the third day. Jesus sees this fragrant oil poured upon him as preparing his body in advance for his death. Was that the actual motivation of the woman? We'll we are not sure. Jesus interprets her act, without necessarily saying that was her motivation. She may have just been doing a kind act toward Jesus during this time of festivities for the Passover. But regardless of what her mental motivation, Jesus saw her heart and knew that this was her way to honor him. And whether she had realized it or not, Jesus says that this was especially fitting and timely. It was preparing Jesus' body for his imminent death. If no one else in the room had Jesus' death on their minds, Jesus did. That Jesus would soon die on the cross would be no surprise. He was well aware of it. But he was ready. And so when this beautiful anointing was done to him, he used it as an opportunity to once again predict to the disciples of his death. A death that was drawing ever so quickly to them.

And so this is the legacy of this woman. Jesus vows in verse 9 with a solemn oath that her act will be remembered. This simple act from her heart will be told wherever the gospel is proclaimed. Certainly her action was something special. Certainly no one should have criticized her. But I think what especially makes her action so memorable is not just the act itself. You see her action is memorable, not so much because it has left a legacy of her good deed. Rather her legacy is so memorable because it anticipated a greater legacy that was about to be left. You see her legacy draws us to see Christ's legacy. You see by Jesus mentioning his impending death in verse 8, our thoughts are moved away from this woman to Jesus. As we think of this great legacy, of this beautiful anointing of Jesus by the woman, we are drawn away from the woman to think about Christ's legacy: his death for us.

Remember, Mark has purposely told us this story of the anointing of Jesus as an intermission to a different story; the story of the plot to kill Jesus. A major reason why Mark is telling us this story of the woman anointing Jesus is to get us to think about Jesus' death. And there's so much irony here. Here the chief priests and scribes are plotting away. Judas secretly meets with them to arrange the great betrayal. They think they are arranging everything so covertly. Remember, the text says that they were trying to use trickery to catch Jesus. All this evil plotting. All this covert plotting. And yet Mark shows us here that none of it was a surprise. Maybe it was a surprise to many of Jesus' followers. Maybe the disciples were surprised, even though Jesus had told them this would happen. And yet to Jesus, it would be no surprise. Here in Mark 14, Jesus is in his final days before the cross. He is acutely aware of this. Whether the woman understood that her anointing him with oil would prepare Jesus for his imminent burial, we don't know. But we do know that Jesus was thinking this way. Jesus interpreted her actions in that light, because Jesus knew that the hour was drawing near. Jesus' mission would almost be complete. The reason he came to earth was to go to the cross. And so let the chief priests and scribes plot. Let Judas betray him. All of this was not hidden from Jesus.

You see, all this trickery was because man had mistakenly thought that they would kill Jesus by their own doing. They thought this was their plan. And in one sense it was. It was their sin in rejecting Jesus that would lead them to plot his death. It was because of their sin that they would crucify him. But though in one sense this was their plan, in a greater sense it was God's plan. God had been planning before the beginning of time for this day. He had planned to redeem fallen man through Jesus going to the cross. He permitted these religious leaders and Judas to plot this evil plot in order to bring about a greater good. Of course, God is so good at that. He constantly takes our evil schemes and turns things around for good. How fitting that he would save humanity in such a way. For the chief priests and scribes thought this was their plan, but it was ultimately God's. Verse 2 should have been one hint to them and us that this was something out of their control. They decided to wait to kill Jesus until after the Passover feast. After plotting how to kill Jesus, they concluded that they had to wait until after the feast. That was their decision. But of course that turned out to not be the case. It would be *during the feast* that Jesus would die on the cross. You see, God is ultimately in control of all things. If he permits man to do evil, it is only for a time, and he uses even that to bring about his greater good. God is control. And what was God doing? He was working in this situation so that Christ's legacy could be left in history and for eternity.

And so as Mark tells us about the plot to kill Jesus, we are drawn to see Christ working out his plan to give up his life. But as we think further about the disciples' criticism and concern in this passage, we are also brought to the same point. Their complaints against the woman, and the way Jesus answers them, confronts us again with Christ's death. We've already mentioned that, but let's look a little further at how Jesus responds to these critics.

Look at verse 7. Jesus says it's good to do good to the poor. He actually says it's a biblical command. You see his words in verse 7 refer to an Old Testament passage. He's alluding to Deuteronomy 15:11 which says that there will never cease to be poor in the land. That verse in Deuteronomy goes on to command us to open wide our hand to the poor. And so Jesus affirms that principle. It's good to do good to the poor. Isn't that even what Jesus had taught during his earthly ministry? For example, he told the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor, so that he would have treasure in heaven. So, shouldn't Jesus have agreed with the disciples, instead of rebuking them? Psalm 41, which we read

earlier in the service, says that people who come to the aid of the poor will be blessed. Maybe some of them thought Jesus would come to their defense, instead of to the woman's defense. Maybe they thought Jesus would bless them, instead of blessing this woman.

And yet Jesus didn't. Though he affirmed that we are called to take care of the poor, he uses that passage from Deuteronomy as a contrast with himself. The poor they will always have with him. Jesus, they will not. Jesus contrasts himself with the poor. And yet Jesus himself is poor, isn't he? Jesus once said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt 8:20). He was referring to himself. Jesus, from day one was born into a lowly manager. He had humble beginnings and lived a humble life. Though he deserved all the privileges fit for a king, he gave up those things to take on the plight of the everyday man, and even of the poor. As he did his teaching ministry, he went town to town, largely living off the hospitality of others. We're not told of any real possessions that he had. But moreso, we're told in Philippians that Jesus, that though he was in the very form of God, made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant. You see, for Jesus, the eternal son of God, to become man, meant the greatest of poverty for him. And so if there was any poor among them, it was the Lord Jesus; Jesus who humbled himself by becoming man, and would continue to humble himself to die on the cross for us, to take on the infinite wrath of God on the cross for our sins. My point is this. By Jesus contrasting himself with the poor, I think we see him as the poor, yet righteous, servant. Jesus is the chief of the poor. He became poor for us all. And so Jesus says it is good to bless the poor that they always have. It is even better to do good to Jesus, implied the chief of the poor, whom they will not always have with them.

Whether the woman realized it or not, she was the one really heeding Psalm 41. By anointing Jesus, she was doing good to the chief of the poor. Jesus came into this world as the poor but righteous servant. He took on the plight of the poor, even while doing good to the poor. You see that's what so interesting about Psalm 41 in light of this passage in Mark. Psalm 41 is often seen as having Messianic expectations. For example, verse 9 of that Psalm talks about your friend betraying you, and Jesus at one point quoted that verse to describe Judas's betrayal of him. But overall, Psalm 41 is about a man being blessed for taking care of the poor. And then the author of Psalm 41 appeals God for those blessings as he himself is suffering. Jesus fulfills both aspects of this psalm. He becomes a poor suffering servant, while at the same time blessing the poor himself.

And so this was Christ's legacy. He came to earth, humbled himself, became poor, all for our sake. And he did this all the way to the cross where he died for us. He did this to leave a legacy. You see in a passage all about legacies, this is the greatest legacy. It's a legacy of salvation. Jesus knew this whole time what was really going on. He knew his death was imminent. But he kept on heading forward. He kept on with the plan. In his short time left with his disciples while he was on earth, he continued to teach them. He continued to explain to them about his mission. He continued to prepare them. Why? Because Jesus would soon entrust his legacy to them. He would entrust to them his legacy which he has left for humanity. He would entrust them with the gospel.

You see the gospel is about Christ's legacy. It's the gift he has bequeathed to man at his death. On the cross he died so that we could live. As Jesus told them, soon he would not be with them. He would die, yes. But he did rise again. The leaving he was ultimately talking about was the ascension. After the resurrection Jesus was lifted up into the skies and is now with the Father in heaven. He will come again, but for now he is not physically with us. And yet when he left this earth, it is then when he commissioned the disciples. That's when he entrusted

them with his legacy. He gave them the gospel to bring to the ends of the earth. And they passed on that legacy to us to continue to pass on and spread. And though Jesus would not be with us physically during this time, he promised that he would be with us spiritually, until the day of his return.

And so saints of God, I hope that you see the significance of this passage today. In a passage about legacies, we have been reminded that the church has been entrusted with the greatest legacy. We have been entrusted to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. That's the plain and simple message. It's right there in verse 9. Jesus says that the gospel is going to be preached to the whole world.

And so will you be a part of this? The chief priests and scribes chose not to be. Judas Iscariot chose not to be. They left a different legacy. They left an infamous legacy of those who rejected the Christ. Jesus in John 17 referred to Judas as the son of perdition - in other words we shouldn't expect to see Judas in heaven. But what about you? Will you live your life so as to leave a legacy for Christ? Will you live so as to advance the cause of Christ? Will you by your words and deeds testify to how Christ has saved you from your sins?

And what a great testimony we have. Whether we are rich or poor financially, our Lord became like us. The Great God and Creator came to earth in the person of Jesus to become like us, so that he can save us. He took our place. What amazing love by the king of kings! He became poor so that we could be made so rich. How can we hold back in blessing him? How should we not freely give of all our earthly blessings in our service to him?

But as we think about living so as to leave a legacy for Christ, I want to point out two common mistakes that we can make. These are two common things that this passage presents. One, we can be critical of others. Specifically, we can be mistakenly critical of others. Why we should be critical in the first place, is a good question; is it our place to judge someone else's servant? No, it's not. But worse, we can be *mistakenly* critical. What I mean is that we can judge someone with a wrong assessment. That's what the disciples did to this woman in our passage. They were critical of her action, judged her for it, but they made a wrong judgment according to Jesus.

A second common mistake is that we can get caught up serving while missing the point. You see, those who criticized the woman supposedly had a good desire. They wanted to do good to the poor. But Jesus said they missed the point. They missed the very Lord of the poor who was right there before them. Jesus pointed them back to his impending death. He pointed them back to the gospel ministry that he would give them. It was in light of the gospel and Christ's death that made service to the poor even important. It's because Christ has shown us his heart for the poor and needy through his saving death, that we should be concerned even about the poor's physical needs. You see, we can get caught up serving while missing the point. We could take something good, like feeding the poor, for example, and forget about the ultimate mission of the church. The church is called to preach the gospel. The church is called to proclaim Christ's death until he comes. Any good deed to the poor, any act of kindness done, is because Christ died for us. We must not let the expressions of our Christianity supersede what makes us Christian. We love others, because Christ first loved us. Don't let our godly living push the gospel aside. Don't let it displace the gospel.

And so how do we live our lives so as to leave a legacy for Christ? Well, yes, we should live godly lives. Yes, we should do good to others, especially the poor. But we should do so because we are serving Christ. We should do so as an expression of our faith. But let's also find ways to tell people about Christ's

legacy. About the gospel. That's the greatest good we can do for anyone. If we really believe that Christ alone is way to be saved from eternal death, then there isn't anything better we can do for someone.

So how do you share the gospel with someone? Where do you start? Why not start with this story? With this story of the woman who anointed Jesus in preparation for his burial. And then tell him why he had to die. Tell him about his legacy of salvation. Amen.

Copyright © 2009 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.