

March 22, 2026

EXTRAVAGANT DEVOTION AND THE VOLUNTARY DEATH OF JESUS

Mark 14:1-11

(9 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)

I've often said that people would line up to change jobs with me if they knew how blessed I am to be one of the pastors of Cornerstone Community Church. But that was not always the case, and the other day as I was leading the new members' class and thinking about the history of the church, I began to reflect on some of those dark days early in my time here as pastor. There were certainly times I wanted to leave. I remember Lili crying on the couch one night, knowing that I was getting ready to go have yet another meeting where someone didn't like the direction in which I was leading the church. It felt quite dark.

But the Lord was gracious through that time, and he gave three people that really aided in sustaining me. One was a dear lady named Barbara Perry, who is now with the Lord, but seemed to take every opportunity to encourage me and let me know she was praying for me in those days. The second was Nathan Young. Nate came and said, "If anyone has a problem with you, tell them to take it up with me." And no one ever finds himself eager to "take it up" with Nate, whatever "it" is. And the third was Martin Luther.

I think what attracted me to Luther in those years is that as bad as I may have felt in any moment, I knew his life had been worse than mine. The emperor of Rome had once said of Luther, "I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther: my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood and my soul."¹ Again, as self-absorbed as I was in my early twenties, I had to admit that Luther had it tougher than a young pastor, getting some pushback and having people leave the church. And so, in my mind, if Luther found a way to press on and endure, then so could I.

That's what made his words so powerful to me in those days. My ritual was to read the Scripture, pray, read something that Luther had written, and then journal a bit. And I remember one day reading a letter Luther had written in August of 1530 that really put wind in my sails when I felt certain that I was on a path to unemployment and soon. He wrote a letter to a political official, who was afraid that the cause of the Reformation wouldn't succeed. And Luther said, "Our rainbow is frail and their clouds are mighty, but it will appear in the end to whose tune we shall dance."² In my journal on that day, I wrote about how if Christians recognize that God is sovereign, there's no reason we should ever feel hopeless. His purposes will be accomplished.

¹ Heiko Oberman, *Luther Man between God and the Devil*, Trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 29.

² Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Trappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 157.

Despite the dark clouds, we will see in the end to whose tune we shall dance. I think that same theme comes out in Mark 14:1-11.

But the theme of God's sovereign control doesn't come out in Mark 14:1-11 because it's a moment in Jesus' ministry when everything is going so well. In fact, the text begins with the opposition to Jesus intensifying. From this point in Mark's gospel until the end, we're heading toward the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But I think if we look at how Mark fits the text together, we'll see a subtle message he's sending the reader that Jesus is in absolute control, even while things seemed to be spiraling out of control against him. And that's where I want to start our walk through this text as we look at it under two headings. The first is that of Jesus' absolute control.

Jesus is in absolute control

As the text opens, Mark gives us a time reference, telling us that "it was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread" (v. 1). Now, this is odd for Mark (to give us a time reference like this), but from this point forward, things really slow down in Mark's gospel. We've covered nearly three years of Jesus' ministry in the first thirteen chapters, but in these last three chapters, we cover only a few days. Mark wants us to slow down and take in the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

But he doesn't give the time marker just to show us how slowly we're going through these last few chapters; he gives it to us because these feasts factor into the planning of Jesus' opponents. We're told in the opening couple of verses that the chief priests and scribes—groups that have vigorously opposed Jesus—want to arrest Jesus and have him killed. But they've got a problem. With Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread taking place, all kinds of crowds had made their way into Jerusalem, interest in Jesus was no doubt at a high level, and if they tried to arrest Jesus in front of these crowds, it'd likely cause an uproar from the people. So, at first, they try to figure out a way to arrest Jesus in a stealth-like fashion, but eventually they just agree that they should wait until after the feast.

Now, if we understand the calendar, this is a decision to put off Jesus' arrest and execution a good while. The Passover was a meal that the Jews celebrated to commemorate the night when God killed the firstborn of the Egyptians but passed over the homes of the Israelites who'd put blood on their doorposts. It was a one-night meal. But the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a feast that started the day after Passover and lasted seven days—commemorating the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt. Therefore, if we're two days before Passover, then the chief priests and scribes have decided that it'll be another ten days or so before Jesus will be arrested and executed.

But they're not the ones in control here, as is made clear in the next episode in this chapter. The next scene picks up with Jesus at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. I don't know if Simon

was a leper that Jesus has healed earlier, but I think that could be quite likely because if Simon still had leprosy, crowds wouldn't be gathered in his home, and that's where they are.

Now, we've already noted that Jesus would go back to Bethany each night before coming back into Jerusalem each day. And so, this scene of Jesus being in Bethany in the evening is quite normal for Jesus in this week, but what takes place next is not normal at all.

We're told that as Jesus was reclining at the table, "a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head" (v. 3). Now, this caused a response of indignation from some onlookers, but I don't want to get into that yet. I simply want to note here what Jesus says this woman was doing. After some discussion over the nature of whether this was a best use of this expensive ointment, Jesus says in verse 8, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial."

Now, what's interesting about this is that Jesus is talking like he's about to be killed and buried. The Jews didn't embalm bodies, so in order to cover the decay of the body, they'd anoint the body with spices and perfumes. In fact, when the ladies come to the tomb on that Easter Sunday morning and find that Jesus is not there because he'd risen from the grave, they were coming, Mark tells us, "So that they might go and anoint him" (Mark 16:1). They were going to put spices on his body.

The reality was that there was never actually an opportunity once Jesus died for his body to be anointed. He was taken down from the cross in haste in order to beat the arrival of the Sabbath and laid in a tomb. Then he rose to life before the ladies could get to him while he was dead. So, there'd be no anointing of his body for burial, that is, except that Jesus tells us that is what this lady was doing right now. She might not understand it as such, but according to Jesus, this was an anointing for his burial that was soon to take place. In fact, in Matthew's account of this same story, Jesus had told his disciples that he'd be delivered up and crucified at the time of the Passover (Matt 26:2). Obviously Jesus sees his arrest and execution happening with a couple of days.

And so Mark's gospel creates this tension that the reader feels to this point. Jesus is talking like he's about to be killed and buried, while the chief priests and scribes—the very ones planning his arrest and execution—have already decided to wait at least ten more days. So what's going to happen? Could Jesus finally be wrong about something? Of course not. We have the resolution in verses 10-11. Mark writes, "Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him." And there it is. The chief priests and scribes will not have to wait until after the feast. Because they have an inside man in Judas, he can find them an isolated place to arrest Jesus, which they can do in a stealth-like fashion away from the crowds.

What this scene shows us, then, is that in the depths of the most devious scheming the world has ever known—a plot to arrest and execute the Son of God—Jesus is still in absolute control. He's

still calling the shots. His opponents may be scheming different timetables, but they themselves must submit to his sovereign plan. They're not the one's writing the script; he is. They're not in charge of him dying; he is. As Jesus will say, "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:17-18). And we know he's laying his life down for us because he loves us, as Paul notes in Ephesians 5:25 that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." And so we see that the sovereign Lord Jesus is in absolute control, carrying out his mission of laying down his life for a people whom he loves.

But this has more implications for us than showing us that Jesus' death was his voluntary choice and not an accident of history. After all, the same Jesus who was in absolute control during these days leading up to his death is the one who reigns over all the world as our sovereign king. He is in control of our world as well. More specifically, we can say that he is in control of our lives. In other words, the rest of Scripture testifies that the absolute control our Lord is showing here is no exception. He reigns over every detail of the universe.

And isn't that comforting? Whatever we're going through right now, we're in the hands of our sovereign king who loves us and gave himself for us. And Jesus intends for us to recognize that and find comfort in it. In the book of Revelation, right before the letters he sends to his churches, some of which call them to endure tribulation, being faithful unto death (Rev 2:10), Jesus introduces himself as the one "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev 1:5). That is our sovereign king, and so we should rest and find encouragement, even in the darkest of moments, remembering that he who loves us is the one who is in absolute control of our lives. But it's not just Jesus' action and control that comes through in this text. We also see that Jesus is worthy of extravagant sacrifice and devotion.

Jesus is worthy of extravagant sacrifice and devotion

I mentioned that in this middle section of our text, an unnamed woman came to Jesus, broke an alabaster flask of ointment, and poured it over his head as an act of honoring him. Jesus interprets it for us by saying she'd done something beautiful, anointing his body beforehand for burial. But not everyone thought this was a beautiful thing. In fact, the first response, Mark tells us, that this act received was those saying to themselves, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor" (vv. 4-5). In fact, it's not just that they're angry and questioned why this might be done. Mark tells us that they "scolded her" (v. 5).

Why? Well, Mark tells us that this ointment was worth over 300 denarii, and, we know from other places that one denarri at that time would have been equivalent to about one day's wage. So, over 300 denarri is close to a year's annual salary. Now, if you search for the average annual salary in the state of Tennessee, you'll find reports saying that it falls somewhere between \$52,000 to \$56,000. So, let's take a little off that to make it comparable, and imagine that you were in that room, and a woman walked in with an alabaster flask of ointment worth about \$45,000, broke it, and poured the contents over Jesus' head. What would you think? Perhaps

like those there, you might think there's a better way to use \$45,000 dollars than pouring it out on the ground. I mean, that's actually a metaphor that can be used for signifying waste.

Well, that's exactly what some of them thought. If nothing else, as they note, you could sell it and use that money to help out a good number of poor people. I mean, there are all kinds of things you could do to have something to show for your money. But instead, she poured it on Jesus' head. That's one answer to why they were angry. They didn't see this as the most valuable way to use that expensive ointment.

But here's another way you could say it. They didn't think that Jesus was worthy of such extravagant sacrifice and devotion. But Jesus doesn't join in their scolding of the woman. Rather, he commends the woman. First, he notes that the poor are always going to be around, and they can always be helped. In other words, he's not downplaying caring for the poor. That is a legitimately good use of money. But that can be done any time. Jesus, however, will not always be around, and he's more valuable than all the poor of the world. And so what this woman did in pouring this ointment on Jesus was, to use Jesus' words, a "beautiful thing" that reflected that he is worthy of extravagant sacrifice and devotion.

I actually think Mark wants us to recognize that this woman sees Jesus' worth and value in a way that those around her don't. One reason this section is written as it is—which I've already noted—is that the first two sections create a tension between the chief priests, scribes, and Jesus on when Jesus will die, a tension that is resolved in the third and final section. But there's another reason Mark writes this section this way. As you've probably gotten used to in Mark's gospel by now, in this text Mark uses his all-too-familiar sandwiching technique. He begins the story of the dilemma about how to arrest Jesus in the midst of the feast in verses 1-2 and provides the solution to the story in verses 10-11, and he inserts an entirely other story in the middle. Typically, he does this in order to show a common theme. In this case, I think he does it to provide a contrast.

You have in verses 1-2 some religious elites in Jerusalem, and their response to Jesus is to seek to arrest and kill him. In verses 10-11 we have one of the twelve whom Jesus has called to be with him, betraying him for an unnamed amount of money. Obviously, both of those groups see Jesus was worthless—willing to be discarded for a few coins. And in between the two, you have an unnamed woman who believes that Jesus is so valuable that he's worthy of the extraordinary and extravagant sacrifice of a flask of ointment that was worth a year's wages. I mean, forget the poor, she could have done something extravagant for herself, right? Yet, she saw what the religious leaders and Judas didn't see. Jesus is worth extravagant sacrifice and devotion. For this woman, Jesus was worth giving up everything. And I think it's fair to say that she wasn't well off because Jesus says, "She has done what she could" (v. 8), meaning, I believe, she had nothing more to give.

From our perspective, seeing Jesus praise this woman, it's easy for us to join Jesus in praising this woman and criticize those who were scolding her, but I wonder if that's what we would do if we were in that room? I think that we can be tempted to have that same tendency that says that

sacrificing for our Lord and devoting our all to him is only worthy if we have something to show for it or if it results in something that the world would applaud.

I think this pressure is something we need to be aware of. I believe as a church, we'll always feel the pressure from the world—and maybe even professing believers—to make sure our money, sacrifice, and devotion are toward those things the world around us deems valuable. I mean, my guess is that if we made the mission of our church to pour all we have into making sure poor residents in Madison County were housed, fed, given vehicles, etc., we may well be profiled by the local news station as doing amazing work. But would we be doing what Jesus commanded us to do?

Don't get me wrong. As individual believers, we can do all kinds of things to help our county. In fact, one of our pastors runs a homeless shelter for women and children. I think ministries like that are great for Christians to be involved in. But good things like that can distract the church from its mission, especially when we recognize that those acts will earn the world's praise.

The mission God gave us as a church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We are to preach the gospel, see people converted, baptize them and bring them into the membership of a local church, and—within that context of having pastors to oversee them and members to walk with them—teach them to obey everything that Christ commands them to do. And I assure you, if we make that our mission, the world won't be quick to say, "What a good use of money." I don't think the local news station will line up to praise us if they hear how much money we've poured into training guys to go out and plant and pastor. I don't think anyone will run a story about how great of a use of money it is to build a space where we can gather and praise the risen Lord, sit under the teaching of the world, and seek to build one another up on the first day of the week. Gathering and worshiping the Lord probably feels to the world a bit like pouring ointment over Jesus' head.

Tom's question he asked a number of years ago always serves to help focus me when I think about what we're doing as a church. He asked, "What wouldn't happen if the church of our Lord Jesus Christ didn't exist?" I mean, there's much that still would happen. I think there'd be charities that focus on caring for the poor and homeless. There might even be people who are passionate about stopping abortion. Those things are beautiful. But there wouldn't be anyone gathering to praise the risen and reigning Lord. No one would be training guys and sending them out to plant and pastor churches. That's something only the church of our Lord Jesus Christ does, and it's something we must never be distracted from—no matter how much the world may scold or attack us for it. But Jesus is worth obeying, even when obedience demands extravagant sacrifice from us. So let's trust and obey as a church and as individuals who know our Lord's love for us and love him in return. Amen.