

The Goal of the Gospel

from *The Normal Christian Life*

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The Lord ordained that the story of Mary anointing him with that costly ointment should always accompany the story of the Gospel; that which Mary has done should always be coupled with what the Lord has done. That is his own statement. What does he intend that we should understand by it?

For our final chapter we will take as our starting-point an incident in the Gospels that occurs under the very shadow of the Cross—an incident that, in its details, is at once historic and prophetic. "While he was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster cruse of ointment of spikenard very costly; and she brake the cruse, and poured it over his head Jesus said Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, that also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her" (Mark 14:3, 6, 9).

Thus the Lord ordained that the story of Mary anointing him with that costly ointment should always accompany the story of the Gospel; that which Mary has done should always be coupled with what the Lord has done. That is his own statement. What does he intend that we should understand by it?

I think we all know the story of Mary's action well. From the details given in John chapter 12, where the incident follows not long after her brother's restoration to life, we may gather that the family was not a specially wealthy one. The sisters had to work in the house themselves, for we are told that at this feast "Martha also served" (John 12:2 and compare Luke 10:40).* No doubt every penny mattered to them. Yet one of those sisters, Mary, having among her treasures an alabaster cruse containing three hundred pence worth of ointment, expended the whole thing on the Lord. Human reasoning said this was really too much: it was giving the Lord more than his due. That is why Judas took the lead, and the other disciples supported him, in voicing a general complaint that Mary's action was a wasteful one.

*The author here takes the fairly common view that the "house of Simon the leper" was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Simon presumably also being a relative of the two sisters.

WASTE

"But there were some that had indignation among themselves saying, To what purpose hath this waste of the ointment been made? For this ointment might have been sold for above three hundred pence and given to the poor. And they murmured against her" (Mark 14:4, 5). These words bring us to what I believe the Lord would have us consider finally together, namely, that which is signified by the little word "waste."

What is waste? Waste means, among other things, giving more than is necessary. If a shilling will do and you give a pound, it is a waste. If two grams will do and you give a kilogram, it is a waste. If three days will suffice to finish a task well enough and you lavish five days or a week on it, it is a waste. Waste means that you give something too much for something too little. If someone is receiving more than he is considered to be worth, then that is waste.

But remember, we are dealing here with something which the Lord said was to go out with the Gospel, wherever that Gospel should be carried. Why? Because he intends that the preaching of the Gospel should issue something along the very lines of the action of Mary here, namely, that people should come to him and waste themselves on him. This is the result that he is seeking.

We must look at this question of wasting on the Lord from two angles: that of Judas (John 12:4-6) and that of the other disciples (Matthew 26:8, 9); and for our present purpose we will run together the parallel accounts.

All of the twelve thought it a waste. To Judas of course, who had never called Jesus "Lord," everything that was poured out upon him was waste. Not only was ointment waste: even water would have been waste. Here Judas stands for the world. In the world's estimation the service of the Lord, and our giving ourselves to him for such service, is sheer waste. He has never been loved, never had a place in the hearts of the world, so any giving to him is a waste. Many say: "Such-and-such a man could make good in the world if only he were not a Christian!" Because a man has some natural talent or other asset in the world's eyes, they count it a shame for him to be

serving the Lord. They think such people are really too good for the Lord. "What waste of a useful life!" they say.

Let me give a personal instance. In 1929 I returned from Shanghai to my home town of Foochow. One day I was walking along the street with a stick, very weak and in broken health, and I met one of my old college professors. He took me into a teashop where we sat down. He looked at me from head to foot and from foot to head, and then he said: "Now look here; during your college days we thought a good deal of you, and we had hopes that you would achieve something great. Do you mean to tell me that this is what you are?" Looking at me with penetrating eyes, he asked that very pointed question. I must confess that, on hearing it, my first desire was to break down and weep. My career, my health, everything had gone, and here was my old professor who taught me law in the school, asking me: "Are you still in this condition, with no success, no progress, nothing to show?"

But the very next moment-and I have to admit that in all my life it was the first time I really knew what it meant to have the "Spirit of glory" resting upon me. The thought of being able to pour out my life for my Lord flooded my soul with glory. Nothing short of the Spirit of glory was on me then. I could look up and without a reservation say, "Lord, I praise thee! This is the best thing possible; it is the right course that I have chosen!" To my professor it seemed a total waste to serve the Lord; but that is what the Gospel is for--to bring each one of us to a true estimate of his worth.

Judas felt it a waste. "We could manage better with the money by using it in some other way. There are plenty of poor people. Why not rather give it for charity, do some social service for their uplift, help the poor in some practical way? Why pour it out at the feet of Jesus?" (see John 12:4-6). That is always the way the world reasons. "Can you not find a better employment for your life? Can you not do something better with yourself than this? It is going a bit too far to give yourself altogether to the Lord!"

But if the Lord is worthy, then how can it be a waste? He is worthy to be so served. He is worthy for me to be his prisoner. He is worthy for me just to live for him. He is worthy! What the world says about this does not matter. The Lord says: "Do not trouble her." So let us not be troubled. Men may say what they like, but we can stand on this ground, that the Lord said, "It is a good work. Every true work is not done on the poor;

every true work is done to me." When once our eyes have been opened to the real worth of our Lord Jesus, nothing is too good for him.

But I do not want to dwell too much on Judas. Let us go on to see what was the attitude of the other disciples, because their reaction affects us even more than does his. We do not greatly mind what the world is saying; we can stand that, but we do very much mind what other Christians we saying who ought to understand. And yet we find that they said the same thing as Judas; and they not only said it but they were very upset, very indignant about it. ["When the disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor" \(Matthew 26:8, 9\).](#)

Of course we know that the attitude of mind is all too common among Christians which says, "Get all you can for as little as possible." That however is not what is in view here, but something deep.. Let me illustrate. Has someone been telling you that you are wasting your life by sitting still and not doing much? They say, "Here are people who ought to get out into this or that kind of work. They could be used to help this or that group of people. Why are they not more active?"--and in saying so, their whole idea is use. Everything ought to be used to the full in ways they understand.

There are those who have been very concerned with some dear servants of the Lord on this very ground, that they are apparently not doing enough. They could do so much more, they think, if they could secure an entry somewhere and enjoy a greater acceptance and prominence in certain circles. They could then be used in a far greater way. I have spoken already of a sister whom I knew for a long time and who, I think, is the one by whom I have been helped most. She was used of the Lord in a very real way during those years when I was associated with her, though to some of us at the time this was not so apparent. The one concern in my heart was this: "She is not used!" Constantly I said to myself, "Why does she not get out and take some meetings, go somewhere, do something? It is a waste for her to be living in that small village with nothing happening!" Sometimes, when I went to see her, I almost shouted at her. I said, "No one knows the Lord as you do. You know the Book in a most living way. Do you not see the need around? Why don't you do something? It is a waste of time, a waste of energy, a waste of money, a waste of everything, just sitting here and doing nothing!"

But no, brethren, that is not the first thing with the Lord. He wants you and me to be used, certainly. God forbid that I should preach inactivity, or seek to justify a complacent attitude to the world's need. As Jesus himself says he., "the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world." But the question is one of emphasis. Looking back today, I realize how greatly the Lord was in fact using that dear sister to speak to a number of us who, as young men, were at that time in his training school for this very work of the Gospel I cannot thank God enough for her and for the influence of her life upon me.

What, then, is the secret? Clearly it is this, that in approving Mary's action at Bethany, the Lord Jesus was laying down one thing as a basis of all service: that you pour out all you have, your very self, unto him; and if that should be all he allows you to do, that is enough. It is not first of all a question of whether "the poor" have been helped or not. That will follow, but the first question is: Has the Lord been satisfied?

There is many a meeting we might address, many a convention at which we might minister, many a Gospel campaign in which we might have a share. It is not that we are unable to do it. We could labor and be used to the full; but the Lord is not so concerned about our ceaseless occupation in work for him. That is not his first object. The service of the Lord is not to be measured by tangible results. No, my friends, the Lord's first concern is with our position at his feet and our anointing of his head. Whatever we have as an "alabaster box": the most precious thing, the thing dearest in the world to us-yes, let me say it, the outflow from us of a life that is produced by the very Cross itself-we give that all up to the Lord. To some, even of those who should understand, it seems a waste; but that is what he seeks above all. Often enough the giving to him will be in tireless service, but he reserves to himself the right to suspend the service for a time, in order to discover to us whether it is that, or himself, that holds us.

MINISTERING TO HIS PLEASURE

["Wheresoever the gospel shall be preached that also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of" \(Mark 14:9\).](#)

Why did the Lord say this? Because the Gospel is meant to produce this. It is what the Gospel is for. The Gospel is not just to satisfy sinners. Praise the Lord, sinners will be satisfied! but their satisfaction is, we may say, a blessed byproduct of the Gospel and

not its primary aim. The Gospel is preached in the first place so that the Lord may be satisfied.

I am afraid we lay too much emphasis on the good of sinners and we have not sufficiently appreciated what the Lord has in view as his goal. We have been thinking how the sinner will fare if there is no Gospel, but that is not the main consideration. Yes, Praise God! the sinner has his part. God meets his need and showers him with blessings; but that is not the most important thing. The first thing is this, that everything should be to the satisfaction of the Son of God. It is only when he is satisfied that we shall be satisfied and the sinner will be satisfied. I have never met a soul who has set out to satisfy the Lord and has not been satisfied himself. It is impossible. Our satisfaction comes unfailingly when we satisfy him first.

But we have to remember this, that he will never be satisfied without our "wasting" ourselves upon him. Have you ever given too much to the Lord? May I tell you something? One lesson some of us have come to learn is this, that in divine service the principle of waste is the principle of power. The principle which determines usefulness is the very principle of scattering. Real usefulness in the hand of God is measured in terms of "waste." The more you think you can do, and the more you employ your gifts up to the very limit (and some even go over the limit!) in order to do it, the more you find that you are applying the principle of the world and not of the Lord. God's ways with us are all designed to establish in us this other principle, namely, that our work for him springs out of our ministering to him. I do not mean that we going to do nothing; but the first thing for us must be the Lord himself, not his work.

But we must come down to very practical issues. You say: "I have given up a position; I have given up a ministry; I have foregone certain attractive possibilities of a bright future, in order to go on with the Lord in this way. Now I try to serve him. Sometimes it seems that the Lord hews me, and sometimes he keeps me waiting for a definite answer. Sometimes he uses me, but sometimes it seems that he passes me by. Then, when this is so, I compare myself with that other fellow who is in a certain big system. He too had a bright future, but he has never given it up. He continues on and he serves the Lord. He sees souls saved and the Lord blesses his ministry. He is successful-I do not mean materially, but spiritually-and I sometimes think he looks more like a Christian than I do, so happy, so satisfied. After all, what do I get out of this? He had a good time; I have all the bad time. He has never gone this way, and yet he has much

that Christians today regard as spiritual prosperity, while I have all sorts of complications coming to me. What is the meaning of it all? Am I wasting my life? Have I really given too much?"

So there is your problem. You feel that were you to follow in that other brother's steps-were you, shall we say, to consecrate yourself enough for the blessing but not enough for the trouble, enough for the Lord to use you but not enough for him to shut you up-all would be perfectly all right. But would it? You know quite well that it would not.

Take your eyes off that other man! Look at your Lord, and ask yourself again what it is that he values most highly. The principle of waste is the principle that he would have govern us. "She is doing this for me." True satisfaction is brought to the heart of God when we really, as people would think, "wasting" ourselves upon him. It seems as though we are giving too much and getting nothing-and that is the secret of pleasing God.

Oh, friends, what are we seeking? Do we seek for "use" as those disciples did? They wanted to make every penny of those three hundred pence go to its full length. The whole question was one of obvious "usefulness" to God in terms that could be measured and put on record. The Lord waits to hear us say: "Lord, I do not mind about that. If I can only please thee, it is enough."

ANOINTING HIM BEFOREHAND

"Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor always with you, and whensoever ye will ye can do them good: but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she hath anointed my body aforehand for the burying" (Mark 14:6-8).

In these verses the Lord Jesus introduces a time-factor with the word "beforehand," and this is something of which we can have a new application today, for it is as important to us now as it was to her then. We all know that in the age to come we shall be called to a greater work-not to inactivity. "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:21; and compare Matthew 24:47 and Luke 19:17). Yes, there will be a greater work; for the work of God's house will go on, just as in the story the cue of the poor went on. The poor would always be with them, but they could not

always have him. There was something, represented by this pouring out of the ointment, which Mary had to do beforehand or she would have no later opportunity. I believe that in that day we shall all love him as we have never done now, but yet that it will be more blessed for those who have poured out their all upon the Lord today. When we see him face to face, I trust that we shall all break and pour out everything for him. But today-what are we doing today?

Several days after Mary broke the alabaster box and poured the ointment on Jesus' head, there were some women who went early in the morning to anoint the body of the Lord. Did they do it? Did they succeed in their purpose on that first day of the week? No, there was only one soul who succeeded in anointing the Lord, and it was Mary, who anointed him beforehand. The others never did it, for he had risen. Now I suggest that, in just such a way, the manner of time may be supremely important to us also, and that for us the question above all questions is: What am I doing to the Lord today?

Have our eyes been opened to see the preciousness of the One whom we serving? Have we come to see that nothing less than the dearest, the costliest, the most precious, is fit for him? Have we recognized that working for the poor, working for the benefit of the world, working for the souls of men and for the eternal good of the sinner-all these so necessary and valuable things--right only if they are in their place? In themselves, as things apart, they are as nothing compared with work that is done to the Lord.

The Lord has to open our eyes to his worth. If there is in the world some precious art treasure, and I pay the high price asked for it, be it one thousand, ten thousand, or even fifty thousand pounds, due anyone say it is a waste? The idea of waste only comes into our Christianity when we underestimate the worth of our Lord. The whole question is: How precious is he to us now? If we do not think much of him, then of course to give him anything at all, however small, will seem to us a wicked waste. But when he is really precious to our souls, nothing will be too good, nothing too costly for him; everything we have, our dearest, our most priceless treasure, we shall pour out upon him, and we shall not count it a shame to have done so.

Of Mary the Lord said: "She hath done what she could." What does that mean? It means that she had given up her all. She had kept nothing in reserve for a future day. She had lavished on him all she had; and yet on the resurrection morning she had no

reason to regret her extravagance. And the Lord will not be satisfied with anything less from us than that we too should have done "what we could." By this, remember, I do not mean the expenditure of our effort and energy in trying to do something for him, for that is not the point here. What the Lord Jesus looks for in us is a life laid at his feet, and that in view of his death and burial and of a future day. His burial was already in view that day in the home in Bethany, Today it is his crowning that is in view, when he shall be acclaimed in glory as the Anointed One, the Christ of God. Yes, then we shall pour out our all upon him! But it is a precious thing-- indeed it is a far more precious thing to him--that we should anoint him now, not with any material oil but with something costly, something from our hearts.

That which is merely external and superficial has no place here. It has already been dealt with by the Cross, and we have given our consent to God's judgment upon it and learned to know in experience its cutting off. What God is demanding of us now is represented by that flask of alabaster: something mined from the depths, something turned and chased and wrought upon, something that, because it is so truly of the Lord, we cherish as Mary cherished that flask, and we would not, we dare not break it. It comes now from the heart, from the very depth of our being; and we come to the Lord with that, and we break it and pour it out and say: "Lord, here it is. It is all yours, because you are worthy" --and the Lord has got what he desired. May he receive such an anointing from us today.

FRAGRANCE

"[And the house was filled with the odor of the ointment](#)" (John 12:3). By the breaking of that flask and the anointing of the Lord Jesus, the house was pervaded with the sweetest fragrance. Everyone could smell it and none could be unaware of it. What is the significance of this?

Whenever you meet someone who has really suffered--someone who has gone through experiences with the Lord that have brought limitation, and who, instead of trying to break free in order to be "used," has been willing to be imprisoned by him and has thus learned to find satisfaction in the Lord and nowhere else--then immediately you become aware of something. Immediately your spiritual senses detect a sweet savor of Christ. Something has been crushed, something has been broken in that life, and so you smell the odor. The odor that filled the house that day in Bethany still fills the Church today;

Mary's fragrance never passes. It needed but one stroke to break the flask for the Lord, but her action--that unreserved giving and the fragrance of that anointing--abides.

We are speaking here of what we are; not of what we do or what we preach. Perhaps you may have been asking the Lord for a long time that he will be pleased to use you in such a way as to impart impressions of himself to others. That prayer is not exactly for the gift of preaching or teaching. It is rather that you might be able, in your touch with others, to impart God, the presence of God, the sense of God. Let me tell you, dear friends, you cannot produce such impressions of God upon others without the breaking of everything, even your most precious possessions, at the feet of the Lord Jesus.

But if once that point is reached, you may or may not seem to be much used in an outward way, but God will begin to use you to create a hunger in others. People will scent Christ in you. The most unlikely people will detect that. They will sense that here is one who has gone with the Lord, one who has suffered, one who has not moved freely, independently, but who has known what it is to subject everything to him. That kind of life creates impressions, and impressions create hunger, and hunger provokes men to go on seeking until they are brought by divine revelation into fullness of life in Christ.

God does not set us here first of all to preach or to do work for him. The first thing for which he sets us here is to create in others a hunger for himself. That is, after all, what prepares the soil for the preaching.

If you set a delicious cake in front of two men who have just had a heavy meal, what will be their reaction? They will talk about it, admire its appearance, discuss the recipe, argue about the cost--do everything in fact but eat it! But if they are truly hungry it will not be very long before that cake is gone. And so it is with the things of the Spirit. No true work will ever begin in a life without first of all a sense of need being created. But how can this be done? We cannot inject spiritual appetite by force into others; we cannot compel people to be hungry. Hunger has to be created, and it can be created in others only by those who carry with them the impressions of God.

I always like to think of the words of that "great woman" of Shunem. Speaking of the prophet, whom she had observed but whom she did not know well, she said: "[Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually](#)" (2 Kings 4:9). It was not what Elisha said or did that conveyed that impression, but what

he was. By his merely passing by she could detect something; she could see. What are people sensing about us? We may leave many kinds of impressions: we may leave the impression that we are clever, that we are gifted, that we are this or that or the other. But no, the impression left by Elisha was an impression of God himself.

This matter of our impact upon others turns upon one thing, and that is the working of the Cross in us with regard to the pleasure of the heart of God. It demands that I seek his pleasure, that I seek to satisfy him only, and I do not mind how much it costs me to do so. The sister of whom I have spoken came once into a situation that was very difficult for her; I mean, it was costing her everything. I was with her at the time, and together we knelt down and prayed with wet eyes. Looking up she said: "Lord, I am willing to break my heart in order that I may satisfy thy heart!" To talk thus of heart-break might with many of us be merely romantic sentiment, but in the particular situation in which she was, it meant to her just that.

There must be something—a willingness to yield, a breaking and a pouring out of everything to him—which gives release to that fragrance of Christ and produces in other lives an awareness of need, drawing them out and on to know the Lord. This is what I feel to be the heart of everything. The Gospel has as its one object the producing in us sinners of a condition that will satisfy the heart of our God. In order that he may have that, we come to him with all we have, all we are—yes, even the most cherished things in our spiritual experience—and we make known to him: "Lord, I am willing to let go all of this for you: not just for your work, not for your children, not for anything else at all, but altogether and only for yourself!"

Oh, to be wasted! It is a blessed thing to be wasted for the Lord. So many who have been prominent in the Christian world know nothing of this. Many of us have been used to the full—have been used, I would say, too much—but we do not know what it means to be "wasted on God." We like to be always "on the go": the Lord would sometimes prefer to have us in prison. We think in terms of apostolic journeys: God dares to put his greatest ambassadors in chains.

"But thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savour of his knowledge in every place" (2 Corinthians 2:14).
"And the house was filled with the odour of the ointment" (John 12:3).

The Lord grant us grace that we may learn how to please him. When, like Paul, we make this our supreme aim (2 Corinthians 5:9), the Gospel will have achieved its end.

