

## What's Jesus Worth To You?

Mark 14:1-11

Have you ever had that moment where someone's devotion has totally surprised or shocked you? A total commitment to a person or a band or movie or franchise? I must confess this happened to me several times last year as the Swifties went crazy as the Eras Tour landed in Melbourne.

Thousands paid for premium tickets, hours in a que to get in, or even the dedication to wear an adult nappy to avoid missing a minute of Taylor by going to the toilet... Surprising? Yes. Shocking? Yes! It's devotion like Jake who spent just over \$10k in going to every concert in Australia.

Or consider Luke Kaye, who in Dec 2024 made \$1 million pounds (just under \$2 mil AUD) by selling *some* of his Star Wars collection. Luke has been an avid Star Wars fan and collector for 43 years, he's in the Guinness Book of Records for largest Star Wars memorabilia collection, and only sold some because he literally ran out of room!

He's met the cast, like the late Carrie Fisher 9 times and was recognised by Mark Hamill at an event who described him the 'crazy fan guy from London' which far from embarrassing – Luke took it as a badge of honour. But the peak of his devotion: legally changed his name to Luke *Skywalker*...

What do you think about that kind of devotion? You can't help but wonder what his five kids think as he says every spare penny has gone into this collection? Is this Admirable or wasteful?

But more importantly as we turn to Mark 14 tonight, what do you make of the devotion of this unnamed woman as she pours perfume on Jesus? Because you might think Jesus is exaggerating when he declares that what she's done will be told and repeated wherever the gospel is preached.

Because v.9 really is an extraordinary statement, isn't it? That the actions of this woman during a small dinner party of around 15-20 people in a small town outside of Jerusalem will be retold across the whole world. An indispensable story to be proclaimed wherever the gospel goes.

That how she views and responds to Jesus should be remembered and repeated in every time and at every place. And Mark wants us to pause and reflect on her actions as it's deliberately sandwiched between two contrasting responses. She's like a rose between two thorns.

As she literally stinks up the room with her total devotion to Jesus, the religious leaders are plotting to kill him and one of Jesus' inner circle disciples agrees to betray him. And this is a common theme in Mark's gospel as he puts differing responses to Jesus together with a focus on the middle one.

And as we contrast their responses to Jesus, Mark is inevitably drawing us to pause and answer the question for ourselves: what is Jesus worth to you? What response, what devotion are you giving him, what kind of devotion do you think he deserves and demands?

So what is about this woman's actions that makes them so important, so memorable, and in Jesus' words, so beautiful? Well it's because she gets Jesus right – where the worthiness of Jesus is matched by the devotion and affection he receives.

She gets Jesus right, she gives Jesus what he is worthy of, and to give him anything less than that is not simply inappropriate, but self-destructive. That's where this passage takes us.

Chapter 14 is an important transition in the gospel account as we enter into what is often called the Passion Narrative – the events leading up to the first Easter and Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's called the Passion narrative or story because it's based on the Latin word "passio" – to suffer. This is the final week that leads to Jesus' rejection, suffering, humiliation, and crucifixion.

And Jesus' death will take place during an important time in the Jewish calendar. Mark tells us in v.1 one we are approaching the Passover which kicks off the seven day Festival of Unleavened Bread.

These were important festivals to commemorate when God had set Israel free from slavery in Egypt and brought them to himself in covenant relationship. The Passover was the meal to commemorate the final plague when death came to all the firstborns in Egypt but he passed over the houses where the blood of the lamb was smeared on the door frame. You can read the event in Exodus 12.

And so at important time to remember and celebrate God's rescue and bringing them to be his covenant people, Mark focuses in on the response and actions of the religious leaders.

We find the chief priests and scribes scheming: *looking for a cunning way to arrest and kill Jesus*. They've concluded that Jesus is worthy of death and so they're scheming, planning, plotting.

But with caution: <sup>2</sup> *"Not during the festival," they said, "so that there won't be a riot among the people."* Because the Passover had to be celebrated in Jerusalem it was a time when thousands would make the journey and the population would increase dramatically.

And the guesses on how much it would increase range from 50 thousand to 3 million! But it was also a time when the authorities would be on edge with Jewish nationalistic hopes heightened and disgruntlement with the Roman occupation of the land on the lips of many.

And so naturally the arrest and death of an influential Jewish figure could cause any number of issues – and so they're strategic: patience is the plan – that is, until the golden opportunity will be given to them as one of the inner circle come to them with an offer they can't refuse as we'll see in v.11.

But it's worth asking how did they get here? Why are they so determined that Jesus must die? No doubt that heard him teach, they've seen and heard the stories of healing the sick and casting out demons, he's calmed the storm with a word and even raised the dead multiple times. Why kill him?

Well I think it's been Jesus' insistence that he rules, not them. His demand to be at the centre of our lives, to conform to his will not our own. Jesus confronts our desire to be in control of our own lives which really is at the heart of sin – the desire to be God, replace God, or just remove God entirely.

Because Mark has already shown us how this conviction has been there from the beginning. As they've seen Jesus confront their traditions and understanding of the law (3:6); as he rode into Jerusalem as King he confronted their religious hypocrisy (11:18); and as he's exposed their unwillingness to obey God (12:12), they're resolved he must go, they plot his death.

And by giving us these contrasting responses to Jesus, Mark is showing us that a middle-ground, kind of neutral attitude toward Jesus doesn't really make sense, it isn't really possible if you've understood him rightly. He's either the Lord you love, or the Lord you can't stand and want gone.

The religious leaders want him gone, which is in such a stark contrast to the attitude and response of the woman in Bethany. The scene shifts to Bethany, a few miles outside Jerusalem, it's a private dinner in the house of Simon the Leper, presumably someone healed by Jesus earlier in his ministry

And although Mark doesn't give us much information, John's gospel fills them in. John tells us this is a meal in honour of Jesus after he raised Lazarus from the dead (see John 11). Lazarus was at the dinner and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, were serving the meal.

And yet the meal is abruptly interrupted as a woman enters, breaking the social protocol, to perform a stunning act: <sup>3</sup> *While he was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured it on his head.*

An alabaster jar was an ordinary container for perfume – the perfume however, Mark says is *pure nard*. That is, made from the root of a plant in India and therefore imported and very expensive.

We are told in v.5 that it's worth 300 hundred denarii. Now a denarii was about a day's wage, and with a standard 6 day working week, resting on the Sabbath, this is essentially perfume worth a year's wages (which is how the NIV translates it: *sold for more than a year's wages*).

So to consider this in Australian currency, this is worth about \$70k. And so this perfume was likely a family heirloom, treasured and passed on from generation to generation, perhaps even held as a source of security to sell if required.

And she breaks the jar, indicating her intent to use the whole thing, and pours it all on Jesus. She holds nothing back: a stunning, extravagant act to devotion and affection.

And although Mark doesn't name her, John tells us it is Lazarus' sister Mary who pours the perfume. She gives it all to him. And so this is not some attempt to put Jesus in her debt or somehow seeking to win him over or make him favourable, this is overflowing affection and devotion and gratitude.

This is an act of joyful appreciation that declares to all those watching Jesus is worthy it all as she lays it all on the line: not just her finances but her future, her reputation and social status, maybe even her family status, as she comes to Jesus with a clear declaration that you are worthy of everything.

And what she does shows us three clear things about giving Jesus your all: firstly, it will be costly. Not financially but socially. Those watching on are furious. <sup>4</sup> *But some were expressing indignation to one another: "Why has this perfume been wasted?"* <sup>5</sup> *For this perfume might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they began to scold her.*

For those watching on, some think this not simply crazy like an adult nappy for a concert, they are literally flaring their nostrils in rage because it's just a waste. Such a large amount of money that could have been given to the poor.

And I wonder if that kind of resonates with you? Something in the realm \$70k poured out in a single, unrepeatable, unusable again moment of devotion... It is extravagant isn't it? How would you respond as you saw this happen? Confused? Outraged? Jealous?

Unlike John, Mark doesn't give us the motivation behind such an angry response, yet this does show us that giving Jesus everything isn't something you keep in private so it will put you at odds with others. It will be costly. Whether your reputation or social standing, create tension with colleagues, friends, or even family; it may make you the subject of jokes or criticism.

It may make you look crazy or unhinged to others. Many of you will know Richard Chin, the national director of AFES. When Richard decided to quit medicine and do an apprenticeship with Christian Union then head to bible college and train for ministry, he dreaded telling his father.

He recalls sitting in a car with his father, outside the train station waiting to collect his mother from work. He told his father who replied: "I am willing to go onto the street on my knees and beg you not to leave your job." Then when Richard confirmed he would still be leaving, he did not talk to him for the next six months.

And I think that many of us we instinctively know that this is a problem for us, something we fear: where devotion to Jesus will be costly and awkward and we just don't want to go there.

It's why we are often selective about what we share, not bringing up church or growth group or bible study in case we come across as too Christian or too different. It's why we often find it so natural to just change or be a different person based on who we are around.

It's why we quite easily convince ourselves that it's better not to speak up or speak out about Jesus because it never goes well anyway, or it's just rude or no one would be interested right?

Put simply, we find it natural to hold back and avoid the social cost, but if Jesus is worth everything, if you hold nothing back, it will be noticed, it will be costly, but it's totally appropriate.

That's the second thing this event shows us: if you give Jesus your all, if your devotion to him holds nothing back, it's appropriate and necessary. We see this as Jesus immediately comes to her defence.

*<sup>6</sup>Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a noble thing for me. <sup>7</sup>You always have the poor with you, and you can do what is good for them whenever you want, but you do not always have me. <sup>8</sup>She has done what she could; she has anointed my body in advance for burial.*

Notice that in defending the woman Jesus is not saying that giving to the poor is unnecessary or somehow not part of being a disciple of Jesus. In fact quite the opposite. He commends doing good to them all the time in v.7. It's a consistent message in both the Old Testament and New.

Caring for the poor and needy is central to the heart and character of God and must be a feature of all those who follow God. But he is suggesting that this moment is the exception. After all, love of God comes before and is the directive for love of neighbour.

And so as this woman pours perfume on Jesus, pours out her affection for him, Jesus is saying she's right – it's appropriate. He's saying she's understood the moment. He will soon depart, she taken the initiative and opportunity to express her devotion, and in fact, she's prepared me for what's coming: v.8, *anointed my body in advance for burial*

Now whether Mary actually understood that Jesus' death was just days away we can't be sure. But even if she hasn't got the full picture of what's about to happen in his death and resurrection, she's understood the moment and the man reclining at the table: he is worth everything.

And Jesus commends her for it not simply because it's appropriate, not simply because it's the necessary response, but because it's beautiful. V.6, *she has done a noble* – or more helpfully, *a beautiful thing for me* (NIV/ESV).

It's beautiful because the worthiness of Jesus is being matched by the affection he receives. It's beautiful says Jesus, v.8, because *she has done what she could*. It's important we see Jesus is not commending the monetary value of her devotion.

In fact, the devotion this woman I think is meant to immediately make us think of the woman we heard about last week, the poor widow who put in two copper coins (12:42). Two coins that amount to 1/64 of a single denarii (\$70k; \$3.60). Yet she is commended for putting in *everything* (12:44).

What the women give is fundamentally at the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their financial value, yet both are commended for holding nothing back in their devotion.

And so Jesus commends her because what she's done is right and fitting for who he is. It's noble, it's beautiful, when the worthiness of Jesus is matched by the affection he receives. What she's done is actually in touch with the reality of who Jesus is and what he deserves.

That even before he has gone to the cross to save us from our sins, even before he has risen from the dead with all authority in heaven and on earth, she has seen him rightly and responded accordingly. That he is the one, as we heard in Revelation 5, who is worthy of all honour, glory, power, and strength. The one worthy of all worship and adoration.

Her response is right, her response is beautiful, and her response must be remembered forever as an example to follow. <sup>9</sup> *Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.*"

I think that's why Mark didn't give us her name although we know it's Mary. It's her example of discipleship, her example of worship and affection of Jesus that is to be remembered more than her name. She is a stunning example of the worthiness of Jesus matched by appropriate affection.

She did what she could, she held nothing back, she endured cost and criticism – but what about me? What does my response to Jesus say about the worthiness of Jesus?

The example of this woman brings to ask some important yet perhaps confronting questions:

- Is my devotion to Jesus actually costing me anything?
- Is there any inconvenience to it at all? Whether how I'm using my money or time? The decisions I'm making and priorities of my life?
- Is it the kind of devotion that others notice and know about me because I'm trying to keep it to the private or an unspoken or hidden aspect of my life?
- Do I, would I, in the face of criticism, rejection, and hostility, be unmoved in my devotion to Jesus?

Jesus commends her because she did what she could in devotion to him: but how about us? Her model of affection and discipleship does make us sit up and notice – and also make us a little uncomfortable right? I think that's why in Matthew's account of this, he highlights it was the disciples of Jesus who were angry and criticised her.

Perhaps it made them uncomfortable: They couldn't offer anything like that, they hadn't done anything like that, maybe deep down they didn't want to or to be expected to... Perhaps it was fear of comparison behind their scolding.

Bible commentator James Edwards puts it this way: "The world has never had a problem with religion in moderation. It has no problem with too much wealth or power or sex or influence, but it has a problem with too much religion. That is evident here." Even among those claiming to follow Jesus.

Because I suspect that for most of us, even as we profess Jesus as Lord, there is this very natural desire to limit or control the expectations of what we might lose or what it might cost us as we follow Jesus. Simply put, we like to have our commitment to Jesus in moderation.

Could that be said of you? You hold nothing back when it comes to generosity whether with your money or time? You hold nothing back when it comes to standing out as a follower of Jesus?

They are hard and perhaps confronting questions – and this woman’s beautiful example stands here not to condemn us but to urge us not to settle for anything less than what the worthiness of Christ demands and deserves.

And it’s important we hear and heed that urging because it is possible to *look* like you’re on board but ultimately not be. That’s what we see in vv.10-11. Mark points it out for us again the point that Judas is *one of the twelve*, that inner circle crew who had been with Jesus for years. And it is shocking right?

Having seen and heard so much: Judas would have watched Lazarus come out of the tomb after being dead for 4 days, and now eating a meal with him, and having watched Mary pour the perfume over Jesus and hear his commendation of how beautiful her actions were, he resolves to betray him.

And notice they don’t twist his arm, there is no pressure, it’s his initiative: <sup>10</sup> *Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.* <sup>11</sup> *And when they heard this, they were glad and promised to give him money. So he started looking for a good opportunity to betray him.*

John’s Gospel actually tells us it was Judas who led the scolding of the woman suggesting the perfume should have been sold and given to the poor. Yet perhaps it was actually Jesus’ response to that criticism and his commendation of her actions that actually tipped him over the edge.

He wouldn’t go there, wouldn’t give him that much, and that if that’s the expectation then he’s out. Tim Keller says, “Religious people find God useful, Gospel people find Him beautiful.”

Judas is one of the twelve, looks the real deal, but ultimately concludes Jesus isn’t worth everything, but only worth using for personal gain. He’s a follower of Jesus only while he remains in control. He follows Jesus only in moderation until while its convenient, but no further.

The woman sacrificed her money for her faith in Jesus. Judas sacrificed his faith for his money. And we need to see that folly of that so we don’t repeat it.

Think about it: Judas heard Jesus promise 3 times that he’ll die and rise again, he just heard Jesus say that Mary’s anointing with perfume was for his death and burial, and he thinks he can betray him to be killed for his own advantage? As we will see in the coming weeks, it just serves Jesus’ plan!

Yet as Judas’ example is contrasted to Mary’s we are being urged not to make the same mistake that is perhaps easier and more common than we’d like to admit.

Because it is easy to condemn Judas isn’t it. To sit in judgement and think how could he do that given all he’s seen and heard – given what he just witnessed. Yet maybe that’s simply because Judas’ compromise is written down and public but ours isn’t it.

How easily do we compromise and sell-out our faith for our greed and idols. How readily are we selective about our faithfulness and just expect Jesus to be ok with our compromise or moderation.

It’s very easy to just want enough of Jesus to benefit yourself, but not enough to be inconvenienced by him. Enough Jesus to comfort you, but not change you. Enough Jesus to know you’re saved, but not enough to compel you to care about anyone else being saved. To in a generous community but not be generous...

And sadly we are hearing about it all too often aren't we? The Christian leader that is a domineering bully; the pastor who is caught in a long-term affair with someone in the congregation; the world-famous travelling preacher who abused several women on his staff team.

And they are just the high-profile ones that we hear all about. And it's easy to condemn them isn't it – they should have known better, they should have been better, how awful! And that's true. But are we willing to look at our own hearts? Willing to pray with David in Psalm 139: <sup>23</sup> *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.* <sup>24</sup> *See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

And isn't it beautiful that you can pray that prayer, with the compromised hearts we have, and be totally safe. Because at the heart of Jesus who is worthy of all praise, worship, and honour, is his death in our place. Isn't that what we heard in Revelation 5?

The lamb who was slain yet sits on the throne as king of kings: the one who purchased people for God with his blood and made them to be a kingdom and priests (vv.9-10).

So if you're new to Christianity or just beginning to explore Jesus, please keep coming as we go through this Passion Narrative, that first easter, and see Jesus die and rise just as he promised.

Because when you know that Jesus went to the cross for your sin, and that he's risen in glory as king the kings who rules the world, you realise that his beauty, his worthiness, is ultimately not something we get to decide or limit at all. It's a reality that confronts us and calls us to give him what he's due.

As Psalm 29 says, <sup>2</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.* That's why giving Jesus total devotion and affection is so beautiful, so good for us, but also why giving him anything less is not simply wrong but self-destructive.

So what's Jesus worth to you? Is it some small and convenient moderation you've decided, you can limit or control, or is it humble and total devotion to the one who deserves everything you've got?

Isaac Watts said it beautifully: "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all."

Let's pray.