

**Message No:** AR068  
**Series:** Appearance and Reality  
**Section:** Conduct, Service, Action  
**Subsection:** Effective service and contribution to God's kingdom  
**Date preached:** 4 Mar 90  
**Date edited:** 1 Dec 14

## **SERVICE AND GOOD WORKS – THE WOMAN WHO BROKE THE ALABASTER VIAL (2)**

### **Introduction**

The account in Mark 14:3-9 of the woman who broke the alabaster vial has deep truths that are helpful to those who desire to live lives that are pleasing to the Lord. We see in this incident that the woman was willing to break an alabaster vial of very costly perfume and pour it over the head of the Lord Jesus. Many who witnessed what she did were not happy with her. We see in the parallel passage in Matthew 26 that among them were the Lord's disciples.

These people were indignant with her. They considered it a waste to pour such costly perfume in that way. Yet we see the Lord Jesus commending her highly for a good deed done to Him. The Lord Jesus declared that "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her" (v. 9).

In the last message we reflected on why the Lord Jesus commended her in this way, and why the others around her reacted so differently. There are many helpful lessons we can learn from this episode.

In this message, I want to continue with further reflections on what we can learn from this incident for our personal application.

### **1. Doing what we can**

Let us begin by reflecting on the words of the Lord Jesus in verse 8. We read in the first part of verse 8: "She has done what she could".

I see here a very important principle for us to ponder about: Doing what we can meaningfully do, consistent with our profession of faith in the Lord.

Sometimes, when we look at other people and what they can do, we may feel that they are so much more able. There are so many things they can do that we cannot.

It is important for us to recognise that we should not be bothered about what others can do that we cannot. We should not excuse ourselves on the ground that we have little to give, or that we are incapable, or that we cannot do much. We must look to the Lord to see what we can do, by His grace, at our stage of development, whatever

is pleasing to the Lord. That is how we must live our lives, day by day, moment by moment. If we live by this principle, we can look to the Lord for grace to continue to learn, develop and grow, and then increasingly we will be able to do more.

The Lord expects us to do what we can at all times. As we do what we can, we will not only be doing something meaningful that the Lord appreciates, but we will also be exercising ourselves. We will learn many things as we go through various situations with the Lord in this way, and we will experience His working in and through our lives.

Let us learn from what the apostle Paul has to say on this issue in 2 Corinthians 8:10-12.

**2 Corinthians 8:10-12**

10 I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it.

11 But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability.

12 For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

In this context Paul was talking about the subject of giving. But the principle extends beyond giving financial and material things. It includes all that we have, what we are able to do, by God's grace.

One aspect to take note of is what Paul says in verse 10: "to desire to do it". When we contribute to the Lord's work, we are not to do so grudgingly or under compulsion, but willingly, cheerfully and joyfully.

Another aspect is that of seeing to completion by our ability what we have desired (v. 11).

We may recognise many things that are meaningful and pleasing in the eyes of God, and we desire to do something about them. But for many of us, it remains just a desire. We do not go on to do what we are able to. Even if we do go on to do something, our effort is often feeble or the enthusiasm short-lived. After working at it for a while, our effort peters out.

We must be ready and willing to do what we can. And we must continue at it till completion. That is what the Lord requires of us. Let us not be concerned about what we do not have or what we cannot do.

Seeking to do what is meaningful in the eyes of God and doing what we can by His grace ought to be our whole approach to life. Let us consider how we can apply this principle to some major areas in life.

*a. Pursuit of scriptural truths*

We recognise the importance of the Scriptures and many of us have this desire within us to search and understand the Scriptures. We want to have a good grasp of the truth. If we do not yet have this desire, we should nurture it. It has been the burden of my heart, that every believer may develop a healthy desire to know the truth and have a sound knowledge of the Scriptures.

But we must go beyond recognising the importance of understanding the Scriptures. We must set apart time and make effort to read the Scriptures. We must look to the Lord to help us understand, to ponder over and grapple with the various issues and areas of truth we encounter in the Scriptures.

At the same time, we need to avail ourselves of all avenues through which we can be helped in this area. We may not have insights into the Scriptures like some others may have. But we can respond deeply to God whenever He speaks to us. We must also be thankful and diligent when God grants us opportunities to learn and benefit from others to whom He has given insight into the Scriptures and knowledge of the truth. They are God's gifts to His church. This is the attitude the Lord is looking for in each one of us. Let us ask ourselves whether we are responding well according to what we are able to by His grace.

*b. Prayer Life*

As with searching the Scriptures, we should also recognise the importance of our prayer life and have a healthy desire to develop well in this area. Then following from there, we are to carry on to completion what we have purposed according to our ability. We need to look to the Lord to guide and help us to nurture our prayer life and exercise ourselves to contribute our part in prayer in church life and in our personal time with the Lord.

*c. Church life*

Many of us do recognise the meaningfulness and great potential of healthy church life in the fulfilment of God's purposes, and we want to contribute our part in church life. It is important that we continue to deepen our insight into church life. As we do so, our desire to have a meaningful part in it will grow. From desire, we go on to completion according to our ability, by the grace of the Lord.

We ought to ask ourselves whether we are contributing what we can to the various aspects of church life, for example, in the worship service. This is an area of concern. It is clear that the quality of open worship can be significantly better if each one of us abide by this principle of contributing our part according to what is feasible, what is suitable, what we are able. When we fail to prepare ourselves to contribute our part, when we withdraw and hold back, the quality of the worship service will be affected.

In our own lives too, we suffer loss because we have not exercised ourselves and responded to the Lord according to what we can contribute. Yes, there may be the desire, but often it stops at the desire stage. We do not go on to complete it according to what we are able.

Likewise, to be present at prayer meetings is important. But to what degree do we exercise ourselves in spirit to join in the prayer, whether silently or audibly?

What about participation in the home fellowship group? Not just during the meeting itself, but in various aspects of the outworking of the home fellowship group. Have we pondered over the different ways we can contribute? Do we do according to what we are able?

Similarly, in many other aspects of church life, let us go beyond affirming our appreciation and conviction that these are major issues in the heart of God. Let us go on to do what we can.

### *Convictions, diligence and consistency*

In all these areas of seeking to understand scriptural truths, developing our prayer life, working out church life as well as other aspects of life, I want to emphasise the importance of being willing and of making diligent effort to be consistent in carrying on to completion what we have set out to do. It is not enough just to be enthusiastic for a while. We must be men and women who develop convictions in the truth and then seek to live by our convictions diligently and consistently. If we do so, we will grow well in the Lord and bear much fruit. We will then live lives that are truly pleasing to God.

Each one of us can live in this way. The Lord will not measure our lives according to the ability of other people. He will measure our lives according to what we are able to do – how He has created us, the gifts and the capabilities He has given to us, the context that He has placed us in and the avenues that He has made available to us. That is what we have to give an account to the Lord for. So while the desire, the readiness is important, we need to go beyond that and do according to what we are able to, what we have, what we can meaningfully contribute.

## **2. Doing what is meaningful and appropriate in different contexts**

I will now go on to reflect on the second part of verse 8: "She has anointed My body beforehand for the burial".

It is important to take note of what this woman had done (she is identified as Mary in John 12:3). What Mary had done in this context is not the same as the pouring of the perfume on the Lord at other times or just the pouring of perfume on anybody.

Here in verse 8, the Lord Jesus said: "She has anointed My body beforehand for the burial". The emphasis is not just on the offering of the expensive perfume but on whom the perfume is poured out on and when this took place. The context of that action gives meaning and significance to that act.

Some may ask: Did Mary really understand the meaning and significance of what she was doing? Did she deliberately anoint the Lord in that way in preparation for His burial because she knew of His impending death?

It could very well be that Mary understood the meaning and significance of what she was doing. This could be part of what the Lord Jesus intended to communicate in Mark 14:8.

Let's look at the parallel passage in Matthew. In Matthew 26:12, the Lord Jesus said:

**Matthew 26:12**

For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial.

"She did it to prepare me for burial". So, she did it with a purpose. It was to prepare the Lord for His impending burial.

In John 12:7, it is put across differently and in an interesting way.

**John 12:7**

Therefore Jesus said, "Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial.

In the margin of the New American Standard Bible, it states that the "it" in this verse refers to "the custom of preparing the body for burial". That is, the Lord was asking the others not to hinder Mary from keeping this custom.

Although it is not absolutely clear that Mary knew she was preparing the Lord's body for burial by her act, the indications are that she had some idea of the impending death of the Lord Jesus, and that what she was doing at this time would be meaningful and appropriate in relation to the preparation of the Lord's body for burial.

We have noted in the previous message that this was the same Mary who was commended by the Lord in Luke 10:38-42. The Lord had commended Mary for having chosen the good part when she was seated at His feet, listening to His word.

In that passage, we read that Martha was busying herself with preparations. But Mary was not bothered with the preparations, not because she was lazy, but because she perceived that at that moment, the meaningful and appropriate thing to do was to be seated at the feet of the Lord Jesus.

Not only was Mary spiritually perceptive, she was also spiritually receptive. She was listening to the Lord's word. There was this desire, this eagerness, this hunger to hear, to understand what the Lord had to say.

It could well be, that as Mary paid close attention to what the Lord had to say, she gathered some idea of the impending death of the Lord Jesus, as this was an issue close to His heart and He had been talking about it on several occasions.

Hence it is very likely that Mary understood that the breaking of the alabaster vial and pouring the perfume over the Lord Jesus would be something meaningful and appropriate in that context.

Mary was spiritually discerning with regard to what would be meaningful and appropriate for different occasions, whether it be sitting at the Lord's feet and paying close attention to Him, or breaking the alabaster vial and pouring the costly perfume over the Lord's head. She recognised that her action was meaningful in that context. There is no indication she was unduly perturbed that many others around her did not appreciate what she was doing or were even unhappy with her.

Many believers view things not from the spiritual perspective, but from the utilitarian point of view. They tend to concentrate on aspects that are easily measured and counted, aspects that are visible and obvious. They have difficulty appreciating what is important in the eyes of the Lord, what is significant in His kingdom, and because of that, are unable to properly participate in the things of God.

If we desire to serve the Lord well, we cannot do things according to our own thinking or the expectations of others. We have to be deeply devoted to the Lord, walk in fellowship with Him and be spiritually sensitive to Him. Only then can we do things of deep meaning and that are precious to God. And the meaning and significance of what we do can go far beyond what we may realise. Let us trust the God of perfect knowledge and wisdom to guide and enable us to do what is most appropriate in each circumstance, as we submit to Him. If we want to live lives that are truly fruitful, we must learn to live in this way.

The issues that we have considered thus far are in line with the meaning of the Lord's comments in Mark 14:7:

**Mark 14:7**

For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me.

Here, the Lord Jesus is not discounting the good deeds that believers can participate in. He is making this statement in the context of what this woman had done and the comments of the disciples and others around. They felt that the costly perfume had been wasted. They thought that it could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. But their reaction revealed that they did not recognise what was really

important in the eyes of the Lord, what was meaningful and appropriate in that particular context.

The Lord Jesus said: "You do not always have Me". He was referring to His impending death. In view of His impending death, this woman's act of pouring the perfume on His head was appropriate. It was not something that could be done at any time. At that moment, preparing the Lord's body for burial was the important and appropriate thing to do. The Lord Jesus highlighted the meaning and the significance of what Mary had done, saying that "she has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial" (v. 8). "She has done a good deed to Me" (v. 6).

There is a place for good deeds, like helping the poor and needy. We can participate in many things that are legitimate, meaningful and helpful, whether in society, or in church life and in the lives of the brethren. But we need to recognise that to live a life that is truly pleasing to God and to be truly effective for Him, we must go beyond just doing what is generally recognised as good, legitimate or permissible.

Many believers go about their lives doing things that others think are appropriate, that others expect of them, or that others are doing. We must go beyond all these things and learn to be sensitive to the Lord and be prayerful in different situations and contexts.

What Mary did was appropriate and had far-reaching significance and meaning. She did something that the Lord deeply appreciated. She could have sold the perfume and used the money for various legitimate purposes. But what Mary did – her anointing the Lord's body for burial – was far more meaningful and significant.

It is not enough just to live our lives in a way that is generally helpful. We need to learn to understand what is in the heart of God and what He desires and requires of us. Some things may be legitimate, needful and important. We may have the resources, the time, and the energy. But the Lord may desire others to be involved, not us.

We should not go about doing things on our own but learn to live our lives in fellowship with the brethren, as a meaningful expression of body-life. We should be open to those who can help us recognise the true perspective, what is really significant, important and needful that the Lord would desire of us to be involved in.

We need to learn to fare well at the personal level and also at the corporate level. A congregation should be sensitive to the Lord as to what He would want her to concentrate on, to contribute to, in a particular context and point of time in church history. This is an issue that ought to be of deep concern in our hearts. We are living near to the Lord's coming again. Many events are taking place in this world and they have significance in God's kingdom. It is vital that we learn not only to be properly equipped, but also to be prayerful and sensitive to what the Lord desires of us. As we

contribute to the Lord's work faithfully as a congregation, the significance of what we contribute can go far beyond what we may realise.

### **3. Beware of having a negative critical spirit**

I want to draw your attention to the contrast in Mark 14:4.

#### **Mark 14:4-5**

4 But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted?"

5 For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her.

The Greek text translated as "indignant" can be translated as indignant, aroused, angry. The people were aroused; they were indignant and angry with the woman. They were scolding her for what they thought was a great waste, and they did not realise what she did was something the Lord deeply appreciated. This led to the Lord's intervention:

#### **Mark 14:6**

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me.

The disciples lacked spiritual maturity and were not perceptive enough to appreciate what was happening and yet they got angry with the woman and were harshly critical of her.

We must learn to be careful about being critical and making harsh comments that can be seriously inaccurate, wrong, or totally off the mark, especially when we are not in a position to properly appreciate or perceive things accurately. It is different if we merely have queries. We may wonder what it is, what it means, or how meaningful or helpful it is. In the whole process, we need to maintain a spirit of humility and openness.

If we are harshly critical over a matter that in fact is valuable and precious in God's sight, we may incur the Lord's displeasure.

### **4. Seeing things as the Lord sees**

In Mark 14:6, we read that the Lord Jesus said: "Let her alone; why do you bother her?"

In this incident, it is clearly improper for the disciples to behave in the way they did because the Lord was in their midst. Instead of being indignant, aroused, angry and scolding the woman, they should have tried to understand how the Lord Jesus looked at it and how He was responding to it. If they had done so, they would have



recognised that the Lord Jesus actually appreciated it. And if they still could not perceive the significance of what was taking place, they could have asked the Lord to help them understand.

The Lord rebuked them for disturbing, harassing and making things difficult for the woman, and for hindering her from serving Him. He told them to leave her alone and not bother her.

Let us realise that this is a serious matter. When we hinder or criticise someone who is doing something important and precious to God, we will have to give an account to the Lord.

But it is different if we give room for consideration and discussion. We may wonder whether it is a meaningful thing that the person is doing. We can discuss with the person. We can also ponder over the matter for our own understanding.

Rather than looking at a situation from our own point of view, we should learn to prayerfully look to the Lord to understand how He looks at it and what it means to Him. He is in our midst. We ought to turn to Him for His view.

## **5. Being true and faithful**

Let us look at the verses immediately preceding the episode in Mark 14:3-9.

### **Mark 14:1-2**

1 Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him;

2 for they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people."

We see here intense opposition from the chief priests and the scribes. They were plotting how to seize and to kill the Lord Jesus. Then we read about Mary's act of devotion to the Lord. Immediately after that, we read of Judas, one of the twelve apostles, joining forces and conspiring with those who were seeking to kill Him.

### **Mark 14:10-11**

10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them.

11 They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time.

Set in contrast to the intense opposition that comes before and after, what Mary did was very appropriate and meaningful to the Lord.

This raises a question for us to ponder about. Can we be true and faithful to the Lord even when surrounded by many who are not? Those who oppose the Lord may be godless people or unfaithful disciples. There may be people like the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees. They may be people like Judas, the unfaithful disciple.

Those who oppose the Lord may make life difficult for those who seek to be faithful to the Lord. There may also be people like the other disciples, who did not understand and disapproved of what Mary was doing.

But we have to make sure that it is through no fault of ours that others are unhappy with us, critical of us, or put obstacles in our way. We have to make sure we are living truthfully and faithfully for the Lord.

It can be very difficult to live well when the spiritual opposition is intense. But if we do, we will become reliable and trustworthy servants of the Lord, and we will be deeply appreciated by Him. And He can entrust responsibilities to us because we will be true to Him, steadfast and faithful, even in the face of opposition.

## **6. Motivation for doing good deeds**

### **Mark 14:9**

“Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.”

I have drawn attention to this point that the words of the Lord Jesus here are significant in that the woman’s deed was taken note of and she became well-known for her good deed.

A believer can at times become well-known for certain things he has done for the Lord. This is not wrong in itself. However, it is wrong when our actions are motivated by desire for prominence, for recognition by men and the praises of men.

We may do things in a way that may appear humble, and does not draw attention to ourselves, but actually within our heart there is a secret longing to gain recognition, prominence and the praises of men. Such fleshly desires in God’s people easily give rise to envy, jealousy and strife.

Much of Christian work done in the name of the Lord has been seriously tainted in this way. And because of this, the Lord cannot freely and meaningfully work in that context, and the quality and effectiveness of Christian service suffer as a result.

This is an area of weakness we are all susceptible to. Let us take care that we do not succumb to it. Let us ask the Lord to help us purge ourselves of such negative longings and desires.

## 7. Doing our part

I want to conclude on a note of encouragement. Let us look at verse 3:

### **Mark 14:3**

While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman ...

What this woman, Mary, had done does not require special skills, abilities or gifts. All of us can contribute something significant in the Lord's eyes that He deeply appreciates. We should not give excuses or be discouraged, thinking that others can do much but we can only do a little.

The critical issue is the condition and posture of the heart, whether there is that deep devotion to God and whether we are in fellowship with Him and sensitive to Him. Each one of us can be fruitful if we learn to live in this way. If we desire to live a life that is truly pleasing to God, bearing fruit in every good work, we need to abide by this important principle of doing what we can meaningfully do, consistent with our profession of faith in the Lord and our love for Him.

We should recognise the importance of understanding the Scriptures, grasping the truths, developing our prayer life and working out church life. Beyond that, we seek to diligently and consistently work at these areas according to our ability and by the grace of God.

So let us ponder over our lives: Is this how we have sought to live out our lives? Are we concentrating more on external activities than on drawing near to the Lord, nurturing our love for Him, our devotion to Him, our commitment to Him? Do we make the effort to develop ourselves to the degree we can, and avail ourselves of the avenues that the Lord has made available to us? Do we learn to be prayerful in the different contexts we are in, to be sensitive to what the Lord requires of us and then respond well accordingly?

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