

The Greatest Opportunity Part 30
Worshiped and Betrayed
Jesus is Anointed for His Burial
God made us to LOVE HIM
Mark 14:1-11

James K.A. Smith is a Christian philosopher and author from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and he's the sort of person who is worth reading if you believe yourself to be smart and wish to be proven wrong. While he writes for a popular audience, he hides it well, as one reason I prefer to read Smith on my Kindle is so that I can easily tap on the words I don't understand and get a definition. *Smith gave a lecture in town earlier this year at Jessup, and I paid careful attention, took detailed notes, and at the end was quite pleased with myself at the fact that I understood a solid half of what he was saying. I took some solace in the fact that some of the theology PhD's in the room didn't seem to fare much better.*

But Smith is worth the effort because buried in the philosophical musings that we mere mortals struggle to understand are some extraordinary insights about the human condition, the state of our hearts, and how we relate to God. And in book *Desiring the Kingdom*, he says simply, **“What defines us is what we love.”**

Isn't that true. Our lives are shaped in innumerable ways, but what we love. Think about the people you love and how they impact how you live your life and spend your time? When I officiate a wedding, and we get to the ring exchange part, I remind couples that your wedding ring is a physical reminder that the decisions you make don't just impact you, but they impact the person you love the most. Love inspires grand romantic gestures, patience in the midst of conflict, and tenderness in moments of illness and vulnerability.

By the way, I know what you're thinking: where's Pastor Lance? We had to deal with this guy last week. Lance is fine. I've kidnapped him, but he's fine. Pastor Lance is up next week and four of the next five, and if you see me preach before 2025, it means someone got sick.

But back to love, let's move beyond people. Think about the hobbies and activities you love. Consider how they mold and shape your life in ways big and small. I love hearing people talk about what they love, because with notable but rare exceptions, anything can sound interesting when it is described by someone who loves it. There are those who suggest that a small talk question that is much more interesting than “what do you do for work?” Is, “Can you tell me about someone or something you love?” Love exerts a massive influence on our priorities.

What we love exerts a sort of moral and spiritual influence on us for good or for ill. We can love people and things that turn us into people of peace, that increase our sense of hope and joy, and that mold us more into the image of Jesus. Or we can love things that make us bitter, angry, or anxious. We can love things that, in turn, increase our love, or we can love things that lead us to envy or even hate. Think of the different life trajectories of a person who loves attention and a person who loves serving others. As a recovering attention addict, I can testify that it takes you places you do not want to go.

And something I find particularly fascinating about love, is that it is impossible to love out of obligation. Sure, we don't do loving things out of a sense of obligation, but I cannot oblige you to love someone or something.

Dr. Smith is certainly correct, that what defines us is what we love. Love can help fulfill our deepest longings and desires, but disordered love can have the opposite effect. And thus, one of the most important tasks of our lives is to keep close watch over what we love, and to consider carefully how it is forming us. And that leads me to the fill-in the blank on your bulletin or on the app. **God made us to love him.**

And not only did God make us to love him, he made us to find our deepest delight in loving him. Following Jesus, is thus not about repressing our desires, but rather it's about reordering them so that they are directed in a life-giving direction, and I'll say more about that a little later.

Dr. Smith goes on to say that not only are we largely defined by what we love, love is, to borrow a phrase from the classic rock band Boston, more than a feeling. You're going to have that song stuck in your head for the rest of the day. You're welcome. Love is something we learn, and it's something that we cultivate. Smith says **"Learning to love God takes practice."** And, he says, we learn to love God not primarily through acquiring information about him, though that is important, but it is **"through practices that form the habits of how we love."**

It might sound odd, but it really is true that we learn to love God not by trying to conjure up feelings of love but through practices that produce those feelings in us.

For me, I find that times of silence and solitude increase my love for God. Whether it's several minutes sitting quietly in my office or time alone on a walk or run where I'm simply enjoying God's presence.

My favorite Scripture passage is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. That Scripture is my anchor in so many ways, and I find that while reading Scripture in general increases my love for God, those chapters in particular remind me what the Kingdom of God is all about. So I return to them with great frequency.

Another practice that increases my love for God is the practice of gratitude. I am very conscious about seeing God's kindness and grace in moments I might take for granted. After a run or a workout I'll often tell God, "Thank you for a mind and a body that can do hard things." When work is stressful I will thank God for a job that is meaningful and that helps provide for my family. When there are groceries to put away, "Thank you God for your provision." Today I had the opportunity to thank God that we have a dog as I was out in the backyard, well, you understand." And I know that sounds really cheesy, and 95% of my gratitude practice is internal so I try not to be annoying about it, but receiving the details of my life as gifts from God increases my love for him.

And I love what Dallas Willard says about spiritual practices, that they are actions that get us to a place where we can encounter God and experience his transformative presence.

And so in the same manner that it is wise to pay attention to what we love, it is wise for us to consider the attention we are giving to practices that increase our love for God to ensure that love for God remains first in our heart. Your practices might be quite different than mine, but the important thing is

that you are aware of them and practice them. I say all of this because in our passage today we're going to see a woman whose love for Jesus led to an extravagant act of worship.

We are in Mark 14 and page 850. This is the longest chapter in the gospel of Mark, and by its end Jesus will have instituted the Lord's Supper, been denied by Peter, prayed in Gethsemane, and been arrested and stood trial. We'll cover just the first 11 verses today, and I'm going to read those verses in their entirety and then we'll go back through it. This passage is another example of a frequent construction Mark uses in his gospel, where he creates a sandwich effect by starting one story, interrupting it with another, and then finishing the original story. Mark 14:1

- 1 It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him,**
- 2 for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people."**
- 3 And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at 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.**
- 4 There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that?"**
- 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her.**
- 6 But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.**
- 7 For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.**
- 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.**
- 9 And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."**
- 10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.**
- 11 And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.**

So this scene takes place just a few days before Jesus' death. He is in Bethany, a house just a couple of miles outside Jerusalem where he had been staying. He was well aware at this point that the chief priests and scribes were seeking to get rid of him, but the text tells us that they were nervous about doing so 'during the festival.'

Passover was one of three pilgrim festivals in Judaism, along with the Feast of the Tabernacles and Pentecost. Conservative estimates say that city's population would double or triple in size during the festival, with others saying it was more like five or six times larger than normal as visitors streamed into the city from near and far.

The Passover was a great celebration of what God did for the nation of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt. Those events are recorded in the book of Exodus. And because the original Passover led to God liberating them from slavery, the annual celebration of the Passover is a time that awakened nationalistic fervor among the Jews, and renewed hope that God would free them from foreign oppression again.

This, naturally, made their foreign oppressors, Rome, nervous.. In fact, it was customary for the Roman governor who was over Jerusalem to move his residence from the coastal city of Caesarea to

Jerusalem during the festival, and he would also bring military reinforcements to help quell any ideas of uprising that might be circulating among the people.

And verse 3 of chapter 14 marks the beginning of the end of the book of Mark. And that ending is bracketed by two stories: this story of a woman lavishing love on Jesus through her costly gift and two women discovering an empty tomb following his resurrection.

And it says they were all at the house of Simon, the Leper, which, first of all, is a bummer of a nickname. We know he didn't actively have leprosy because no one is coming to a dinner party with a leper. Leprosy was avoided like the plague because it was, well, like a flesh eating plague. You're welcome for that mental picture.

Jesus probably healed Simon of his leprosy at some point, but the poor guy, the name stuck. Could you imagine if the most embarrassing medical condition you ever had became your nickname? Oh, Anita the toe fungus, can you connect with Steve the bedwetter in Marketing about the upcoming product launch?

Anyways, they're at his house, and a woman comes with an alabaster flask of an ointment called nard. In that culture it would have been unheard of for a woman to interrupt a meal unless she was serving food, but here she comes. We know from the parallel account of this story in John 12 that this woman is Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who Jesus raised from the dead. Nard is an aromatic oil extracted from a root found in India, which in a world before global overnight shipping meant it was very expensive in Israel. The flask was an object of value itself, looking something like this right here, as flasks of alabaster were used for only the finest perfumes and ointments.

Some suggest that the flask was a family heirloom for the woman, meaning it had sentimental value beyond its market value. And the woman didn't just open the flask, she broke it entirely and poured it over his head. This was probably 12 to 16 ounces of perfume, so we're approaching the line between an anointing and a bath.

A continued theme throughout the gospel of Mark is that the insiders miss it and the outsiders get it. The disciples are often dumbfounded and confused about Jesus, whereas a blind man at the side of the road or a woman desperate for healing recognizes his greatness. The insiders, the religious rulers in Jerusalem, are seeking his death, but Jesus is finding welcome in the company of those outside the city. The insiders, for Mark, grow spiritually blind, while the outsiders have eyes to see.

Upon seeing this radical, costly act of love toward Jesus, some of those present grow indignant. They are aghast at what they believe is a waste of valuable resources. In Matthew's version, it's all of his disciples. In John's version, it's just Judas. Here it just says "there were some."

On a surface level, their indignation is justified. After all, three hundred denarii is about a year's wages for a day laborer, and in the world of first-century Jerusalem the needs of the impoverished far outpaced any safety nets, whether personal or religious, to provide for their care.

Furthermore, while giving to the poor was always a sign of devotion in Judaism, it was specifically customary to give gifts to the poor prior to Passover. This is a shocking use of resources, a seemingly extravagant waste.

And yet look at Jesus' response:

But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me."

Jesus says guys, cool it. She has done something beautiful, *kalos*, which means not only beautiful, but morally and ethically good. Jesus' words here compare to those from his critics in Mark 2 who ask why his disciples don't fast, and he says, you don't fast at a wedding, bro (that's my paraphrase). The time to fast is later, this is a time for celebration.

And in Jesus' correction we find a reminder for ourselves: that which is spent in worship and adoration of our God is never wasted. The world may look at the time we spend, the money we give, the emotion we pour out in worship, and say, like the disciples, wouldn't you be better off using those resources differently? But for those who have beheld his glory, it's hardly a sacrifice.

You don't sense at all that this woman is walking in with her ointment going, do I really have to give all of it? How about I just pour out a little? No, she barges in and busts open the whole container in an extravagant act of joyful love. N.T. Wright points out that, **"The woman's extravagant act of love is a vivid and startling foretaste of what Jesus himself is about to do, pouring out his very life as an act of love for the whole world."**

If you look at the disciples, they judge only by appearance. All they can see is waste. Jesus, as he always does, sees the heart, so he calls it beautiful. And it's interesting that this story comes not long after Jesus marvels over the extravagance of another unnamed woman, the poor widow who gave a penny at the temple. Jesus sees the heart in both cases, and calls it beautiful. What mattered to him wasn't the price tag, but the heart condition. Jesus knows that we are made to love him, so he desires our hearts.

What made this woman's actions beautiful wasn't the value of the perfume, but the state of her heart. But it was the state of her heart that led her to give joyfully.

Understand, friends, God did not make us for lives of spiritual obligation or performance. He made us for delight. He made us to be so enamored with him that we'll bust open our proverbial alabaster flasks and not think twice about it. But it's so easy to get stuck thinking about our spiritual lives in terms of obligation, isn't it? We think in terms of 'what do I have to do for God?'

But that which is received by obligation is of little value isn't it? And that which is given with obligation is rarely given from a heart of love. As I alluded to earlier, you literally cannot love someone out of obligation. It's impossible. If we are stuck feeling a bunch of spiritual obligation then what we need is spiritual awakening, to see Jesus in all his splendor and glory.

Perhaps you've heard the famous C.S. Lewis quote where he says God finds our desires not too strong, but too weak, and as we give our lives, our love, and our emotions over to worldly trivialities we are like children who reject a holiday at sea so we can play in the mud. God made us to love him because in loving him we find our greatest joy and pleasure.

And for Jesus to say that you will always have the poor with you should not be read as a lack of concern. Jesus, throughout his ministry, prioritized the poor. He, by all accounts, lived in relative poverty himself. And his words here are drawn directly from Deuteronomy 15:11 which reads, **“For there will never cease to be poor in the land, therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, to the poor in your land.’”**

For Jesus, care for the poor wasn’t just a priority, it was an assumption. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that when we serve the poor we are serving him, saying Matthew 25, **“as you did for the least of these, you did for me.”**

In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul writes, **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”** In other words, Jesus stepped out of the richness of heaven and embraced earthly poverty, so that the spiritual riches of salvation and eternity with God might be ours.

We cannot hear Jesus’ words as a justification for dismissiveness, as if the notion that we are unlikely to solve the problem of poverty renders it acceptable to lack concern. Neither can those of us who are not poor fall into the woefully misguided notion that the poor are in their position purely because of laziness or some other personal choice that we were wise enough or hard-working enough to avoid. When it comes to the moral teachings of the Bible, you will find few topics covered more extensively than care for the poor.

But Jesus is getting at something important here, and the late Tim Keller captures it well, saying, **“Put God ahead of all else as the only one worthy of your worship and you will find you are pouring yourself out in all sorts of beautiful ways in service to the world.”**

It is when we behold the wonder of God that we will be freed from the worship of self, freed from the worship of money, freed from the worship of influence, and free to give our lives in service to the world.

In her autobiography published in 1952, Dorothy Day commented on this story, saying, **“We must not forget that worship and adoration of Christ go hand-in-hand with service to the poor. This passage doesn’t excuse neglecting the poor; rather, it shows the importance of rightly ordered love, with Christ first.”**

Worship of Jesus is the white-hot center from which our service to the world radiates. *Dallas Willard says that we must keep God before our minds, because this is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls.* And when we’re disconnected from that center, we are operating on our own power, and we’ll eventually run out of steam. I’ve seen too many examples of folks setting out to serve the world in Jesus’ name with the best of intentions. But in their zeal to serve they neglect to nurture their own relationship with God. And inevitable they burn out.

A more sustainable approach is to let our heartfelt worship of God be that white hot center that inspires heartfelt service to the world. One more quote for you from one of my favorite authors. Brian Zahnd writes,

“I am deeply skeptical that we can in the long-term fulfill the second commandment to love your neighbor as yourself if we are not formed by the first commandment to love God with all of your heart.”

True, lasting love for our neighbors begins by receiving the transformative love of God, letting that shape our identity, and then reflecting it back to God and out into the world.

You and I are defined by what we love. The question is not “will we love?” It’s, “what will we love and how will it shape us?” Loving God most shapes us to love others best.

Here is another way to think about this: every human being is searching for transcendence. By that I mean we long to be part of something greater than ourselves, to connect with something that gives our lives ultimate meaning and purpose. Yes, Western society has become more secular, but its longing for transcendence remains as deep as ever. More of us are just looking for transcendence without God.

And whatever we look to for ultimate meaning will produce a certain kind of fruit in us. It will impact our minds, it will impact our emotions, it will dominate our thoughts and shape our actions and desires. It will, in short, become like a god to us.

And we are made by a true God who loves us and says, “That longing in your heart for transcendence can only be fully satisfied through me. Direct your ultimate love and devotion onto me, because in doing that you will find your greatest peace and greatest joy.”

Many of the deepest issues we are face as individuals and as a society come down to a misguided search for transcendence. We are directing the force of our love toward things that are not God, and it is producing in us anger, anxiety, slander, and a scorched-earth approach to getting our way. It’s isolating us and inhibiting our ability to love our neighbors.

I think of the words of Jesus in Revelation where he says, **“And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”**

To the one who desires transcendence, life, fulfillment, a sense of ultimate reality. Jesus says come and drink the water without price.

(Maybe) One more way to look at this:

What made this woman’s act beautiful was that she was so captured by Jesus and that it was her earnest desire to serve him and worship him. Her actions were a reflection of the true desires of her heart.

See, the secular world exalts desire to an almost god-like status and tells us that we will find our greatest transcendence in chasing after our desires without constraint. This turns us in on ourselves and keeps us longing for more. We are stuck trying to fit the square peg of our deepest longings into the round hole of worldly pleasure.

Religion would tell us that we need to suppress our desires and live with a sense of self-disciplined asceticism where we are under control. But the part that gets left out of the sales pitch is that a life spent suppressing desire is rarely a life of joy.

Christian spirituality teaches us to reorder our desires, where we recognize the glory of Jesus and the wonder of making him the object of our greatest affection. And this forms us into people of love, who, as Keller says, can pour ourselves out in beautiful ways in service to the world. Not out of obligation, but out of joy.

Continuing in the story, Jesus says the woman has anointed his body for burial.

Up to this point Jesus has told his disciples of his impending death on three occasions, and yet they are struggling to grasp it. It's unlikely Mary fully understood that she was anointing Jesus for burial, but he takes it as another opportunity to remind his disciples that his death is approaching. Jews didn't embalm their dead, rather they anointed dead bodies with perfume and spices, both as a sign of love and honor and to mask the "olfactory situation" created by a dead body.

But I don't want us to miss a little phrase Jesus sneaks in there: "She did what she could."

Once again, it's very similar language to what Jesus said about the poor woman who donated a very meager sum of money in Mark 12. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, he is not impressed by the magnitude of our gifts.

He wants our hearts. Whether we give a dollar or \$100,000, we are all like kindergartners drawing crayon pictures for our dad. He's not examining our artistic quality, he's rejoicing in a heart that says I want to show you I love you in the best way I know how.

And then Jesus says that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, her story will be told.

And here we are, telling her story. Usually in the gospel of Mark, when the disciples are highlighted it's because they're messing something up or they don't get it. This woman, whose identity we only know because John reveals it in his telling of the story, gets it right.

This sandwich story ends verses 10 and 11 by picking up where it left off in verse 2.

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

11 And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Why did Judas do this? Mark, true to form, is scarce with details and says nothing about motive. Matthew and John say that greed was involved, whereas both Luke and John suggest demonic inspiration. It's notable that the chief priests didn't recruit Judas. The text says he went to them and struck a deal.

Many scholars hypothesize that Judas was a nationalist Zealot, whose primary concern was driving out the Romans and establishing an Israelite theocracy. In other words, he wanted Jesus to be a political leader. They suggest that once Jesus made it clear that he wasn't that kind of Messiah, Judas grew disillusioned and decided to undermine Jesus. We can't say that for certain, but it is a strong possibility given the nature of Judas's betrayal.

And that puts Judas in sharp contrast with the woman in our story. She found Jesus beautiful and joyfully gave all she had. Judas, on the other hand, found Jesus useful for fulfilling his own agenda. Once he realized Jesus wouldn't play that game, he abandoned ship and at least tried to get some money out of the deal.

Understand, friends, the best thing Jesus can give him is himself. If our interest in him is contingent upon his ability to deliver something else for us, we've missed the point entirely. If that is our mindset, he is our servant, not our God. Jesus wants to open our eyes to an infinitely greater reality where he is the supreme object of our love and affection, not for what he can give us, but for who he is. Because he made us to love him.

And the Bible says that we love because he first loved us. And it's one thing to talk about God's invitation to love him. It's another to understand why God is so worthy of our love.

We love because he first loved us.

Some of you here need to become a Christian today. Perhaps you've been around church and you know about Jesus, but you have never made the decision to follow him. You've never asked Jesus to forgive your sin and be the king of your heart and the Lord of your life. If that's you, today can be that day. Today can be the day when you experience the love and forgiveness of God.