



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Anointed for Burial

Mark 14:1—15:47

Of all the people Jesus encountered in today's lengthy Gospel, only one person actually listened to Him and took what He said to heart, and God continues to use this person as a way of giving us great blessings in our own lives, especially as we join her in her devotion to Him and the attention she gives to His Word.

"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" (14:3).

Dear friends, this woman is the only one in today's Gospel who listens to Jesus.

The chief priests and scribes weren't listening to Jesus. "The chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest Him by stealth" (14:1). They only wanted to hear things they could use against Jesus.

Simon the leper's guests (14:4) weren't listening to Jesus. Forget about the death He was talking about; the death that would win forgiveness and life for the whole world (1 John 2:2) . . . What about the ointment?! "This ointment could have been sold . . . and given to the poor" — as if giving to the poor was the main point of Jesus' words.

Judas Iscariot (14:10) wasn't listening. He'd already heard everything he wanted to hear, and now he was taking matters into his own hands.

Was Peter listening to Jesus? Like the chief priests and scribes, Peter rejected Jesus' words. He would rather focus on his own supposed bravado: "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times," Jesus said. But Peter replied, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same (14:30-31).

"And they all said the same." None of the disciples were listening to Jesus. Like everyone else in today's Gospel, the disciples refused to listen, both to the Scriptures that prophesied their abandonment (Psalm 38:11, Zechariah 13:7) and to the Christ who preached the Scriptures to them!

Pilate *appeared* to listen (15:1-5), but Jesus knew Pilate better than that, because He knows what goes on inside people (John 2:25). Pilate was an open book for Jesus. Oh, he gave the *impression* of wanting to listen when he asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (15:2), but God cannot be mocked (Galatians 6:7). Seeing through Pilate, Jesus "made no further answer" (15:5).

Apparently, even God the Father plugged His ears to the voice of our Lord: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (15:34)

Among all the people who are named in this narrative of our Lord's suffering and death, only one person listened to Jesus.



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Sermon for Palm Sunday

March 24, 2024

“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.”

Jesus has good reasons for commending and praising this woman's action when He says, "What she has done will be told in memory of her." This woman is the only person – *the only person* – in today's Gospel whose actions reflect the words of Jesus, rather than opposing and denying them.

As He carefully explained, this woman did not act on her own when she poured this ointment on His head; her actions were the result of the powerful and miracle-producing Word that had been preached to her. "She has anointed My body for burial," Jesus said. Where everyone else was ignoring His teaching about His impending crucifixion and death, this woman was listening! Where everyone else was pursuing their own agenda, either trying to kill Him for all the wrong reasons or attempting to prevent His death because they refused to believe its necessity, this woman's poured-out oil proclaimed, "I've heard Your Words, Lord. I understand that You must die. For without Your death, I cannot live."

"She has anointed My body for burial," He said. Faith miraculously sprang forth in this woman's heart and mind — faith produced by the words Jesus had preached to her — and faith produced this good work in her. "Why was the ointment wasted like that?" the others had said, for the foolishness of what Jesus preached (1 Corinthians 1:21) miraculously produced the equally foolish action of faith: "She broke the flask . . . and poured it over His head."

Beloved, Jesus' words do the same for you.

He declares to you, to me, and to all Christians everywhere, "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." With these Words, Jesus is telling us that He wants us to notice this woman, to learn from this woman, and to take seriously this woman's example.

Consider this:

This woman stands as an indictment against all who will not listen to Jesus — both those who openly reject His Words, as the chief priests and the scribes did, *and* those who only pretend to be listening, like Pontius Pilate. So take this woman's example as a solemn and serious warning, and repent of giving Jesus' words anything less than your full and undivided attention.

For Jesus makes this woman a blessed example for all believers, including you and me, when He says of her, "She has done a beautiful thing . . . She has done what she could." Happier words can hardly be imagined! Jesus doesn't demand a certain level of performance from this woman. He doesn't even seem to notice the quality of the gift. He only sees the powerful result His Word produces. Neither does He judge your gifts, beloved! Pure nard or pennies from under the seat of your car: Your best gift is your best



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gift, no matter what its size or value. Jesus praises and delights in *whatever* proceeds from the faith He's given you. What Jesus says about this woman may then be said about you and all who allow God's Word to do its good work within them: "Leave her alone . . . she has done what she could."

This woman remains focused on Jesus' death and burial, which He had preached to her. He repeatedly declared to all who would listen, "The Son of Man will be delivered . . . over to the Gentiles. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise" (Mark 10:34, cf. 8:31 and 9:31). Having heard this Word preached to her, this woman now confessed the Faith, as Jesus explains: "She has anointed My body for burial." By pouring out this ointment of pure nard, this woman was recognizing the necessity of Jesus' death. Whenever you confess the Faith by speaking the creeds or doing good works like this woman, you too are saying, "Jesus must die." What is the result of His death? Forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for you, for your dearest loved ones, and for *all* who will listen to Him.

Beloved, it's important for you to notice, listen, and take to heart the way Jesus praises this dear woman in today's Gospel! She paints a picture for us of what it means to worship Jesus: Worship means listening to Jesus' words. Listening to Jesus is, in fact, the highest form of worship that we, or anyone else, can give to God. Listening to Jesus means that the living and powerful words of God enter into your ears and go to work for you. Jesus' words produce everything for you.

His words:

- cleanse your sins;
- chase away the shadow of death;
- create a living and precious faith for you; and even
- produce within you good and praiseworthy results. The results of hearing Jesus' words are never wasted, no matter what they might cost. "Pure nard, very costly . . . what she has done will be told in memory of her." As with this woman, so it is with you and all who believe: You shall be remembered and never forgotten, on account of the life-giving words that Jesus has spoken to you.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen