

She Did What She Could

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Date: 08 June 2014

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[0:00] I would like you to turn in your Bibles, if you would please, to the Gospel of Mark.

And I'm going to speak, I hope clearly and simply, on a passage with which you may be familiar. I believe you probably will be as soon as you begin to read it.

I believe it was the better part of 30 years ago that I first found this text. I think it was in a consecutive study in the Gospel of Mark. And it's one of those passages that just won't go away. I've always remembered it. My preaching is not always memorable, but this one, for some reason, I've never quite gotten it out of my mind.

And on occasion over the years, I have returned to it because I'm comfortable with it. I spent some time rethinking and reworking it, and I thought that this might be a good time to look at it again.

[1:03] Mark chapter 14. And I want to read verses 3 through 9. Now, I'm aware that you use the NIV largely here. All right.

There's a sense in which your translation has taken away one of the points I wanted to make. I want you to know that, but I'll show you that as we go along. I'm reading, I just brought this with me.

I have used it for years. It's the old American Standard Version of 1901. And so I'll read it from mine, and you follow along. Verse 3 through verse 9.

Thus far, then, the reading of God's word.

Probably, this is recounted again in the Gospel of Matthew in chapter 26, verses 6 through 13.

[3:05] And I'm not going, we haven't the time to go and to read that and to note what differences there may be in the details of the account. But probably this is paralleled in the Matthew passage.

However, this is not the only time that something like this happened in the life of our Lord.

In Luke chapter 7, in verses 36 through 39, there is a similar incident. And there is another incident similar to this in John chapter 12, in verses 1 through 8.

There have been those who have tried to harmonize or conflate or collate all these four occasions and to try to sort out the differences and to harmonize them into one so as to minimize the differences and maximize the similarities.

The attempts, I think, are abortive. They're frustrated by the details. If you look at each of them carefully, you'll find that probably the Matthew and the Mark passage that we just read are the same.

[4:16] But the Luke and the John passages are very difficult to harmonize. And they're probably separate events. At least twice and perhaps three times in the life of our Lord, something like this happened.

The reason it can't be harmonized is either the principle, the person involved, is different, or the occasion is different, or the location is different, or the action itself is different.

Sometimes the oil is poured on his head, sometimes his feet. And then those who complain or the remonstrance against this action are different. And so it's nearly impossible, I would say, it's impossible to put them all together.

Now whether it happened twice or three times is the question. And I can't answer that for you.

Except for to tell you that this had happened before, perhaps twice before.

It is a pericope, that is, a little event, a little occasion in the life of our Lord, which Spurgeon says does not have the glare or glitter of those monstrous bubbles which the world delights to read.

[5:32] It's a rather homespun kind of event, which might have, in the larger events in the life of Christ, been entirely passed by.

It only took a few minutes to happen, probably no longer than it took us to read it a few moments ago. Now I want to give you a three-fold outline of this passage.

I'm just going to give you the outline, but I'm not going to dilate upon it much. The three points that I find in this text are these. Number one, she did what no one else was doing.

She did what no one else was doing. I'll give you the three. Number two, she did what she could.

That's what our Lord said. She did what she could. And thirdly, she did more than she expected.

All right, let's look at those briefly. First of all, she did what no one else was doing. These disciples, at this point, had been with our Lord for three years. And over those three years, they had become, I believe, anesthetized by being in the presence of Christ.

[6:46] Sad to say that that could even happen. But apparently, I think it did. This is not the first or the only time that they had sat down or laid down beside their food and ate together.

They were apparently invited to many places. And they had, for many times, many occasions, eaten supper with Jesus. And they had become, this had become very commonplace to them.

This was one more time that this happened in a whole string of occasions. They'd been anesthetized, first of all, by proximity. They were around Christ all the time, day after day.

And they were probably around the table talking about who knows what. Maybe politics.

Maybe the seeming significance of events as they began to accumulate towards our Lord's arrest and suffering. Who knows what they were talking about.

[7:51] But they were all probably having a number of conversations between several of them.

And they had been anesthetized not only by proximity, but by their familiarity with Christ after three years of having been with him.

And the repetition of having supper together. This was nothing special. It was nothing new. And one of the reasons I think they complained about this woman's action is that she did what no one else was doing.

And that was paying particular attention to Christ himself. And they'd forgotten to do that. They were too familiar to have thought of this sort of focus upon our Lord.

As Spurgeon once said, You cannot commit a greater crime against some people than to be more useful than they are. Their looks, that is the disciples, were enough to freeze summer into winter.

You can see it. Draw the picture in your mind's eye. What does she think she's doing? Well, one thing she was doing is what they'd forgotten to do. Pay particular attention to Jesus.

[9:05] She did then what no one else was doing. The second part of the outline would be she did what she could. Notice in verse 8, that's exactly what Jesus said.

She hath done what she could. A very literal rendering of the original language at this point. Jesus merely said, That which she had, she did.

That which she had, she did. She did what she could. In fact, I was just asked for a title of this for the tape.

She did what she could. That's my title. All right. And then the third main division that we could impose upon this text is that she did more than she expected. I think she was surprised when Jesus said, She hath anointed my body beforehand for the burying.

If she had said something at that point, and notice she never said a word. But if she were to say something, if we could read her mind, she would say, I did. I did not know I was doing that.

[10:12] I had no intention of doing anything that significant. All I wanted to do was to pour this on my Lord's head. I didn't know what I was doing.

In fact, on one level, she didn't know what she was doing. She had to be told by our Lord the significance, or the significance at least, he placed upon this action.

And so I could caution you against loading this with sacramental premeditation, as if she knew she was doing something significant. It was merely a pure act of devotion.

And it was that very act of devotion which brought the wrath, or at least the disgust, of the disciples upon her. So there's the simple outline. She did what no one else was doing.

She did what she could. And she did more than she expected. Now, having given you that outline, I want to, and this is kind of a habit of mine, and I'll do it in the next hour also, just give you a series of observations, things that we can learn based upon this rather simple text.

[11:26] And so I have several of them. And so that you're not discouraged, I won't tell you how many. No, actually, there's only five. It won't be so easy for you next hour, but I only have five.

Five things then. Let's try to see if we can't learn and find some profit from the text. Let us notice in the first place that real devotion to Christ makes even good men uncomfortable.

Real devotion to Christ makes even good men uncomfortable. Now, let's not be too hard on the disciples at this point. This was a strange occurrence.

Even if it had happened before, it's still strange in an oriental setting. We're sometimes amazed by what we see today in the Near East and the way women are treated and so on and so forth.

It wasn't different, perhaps worse, 2,000 years ago. And the first thing that's strange about this is that it's about a woman.

[12 : 38] For even a woman to be mentioned, for even a woman to be the center of attention, it just wasn't part of the culture of the world at that time. Not only that, it was a woman doing something in a room full of men.

She was the only woman in the room. That's the way things were back then. Not only that, it was a woman coming in uninvited, unannounced, and doing something physically upon another man.

Now, it's probably hard for us in America today to realize this was not done. And the disciples are aghast to see a woman in a room full of men anointing another man.

This was completely cross-cultural as far as they were concerned. It was an action which suggested impropriety and at least unconventionality.

As Spurgeon says, had some of us been there, we might have called it reckless eccentricity, extravagance or fanaticism or precipitancy or waste which is exactly what they did.

[14 : 06] J.C. Ryle in his expository thoughts on the Gospels of course comments on these texts. He says, there is never wanting a generation of people who decry what they call extremes in religion.

and are incessantly recommending what they term moderation. If a man devotes himself to the world, they do not blame him.

But if the same man devotes himself to Christ, they can scarcely find words to express their sense of his folly. This spirit, the spirit of these narrow-minded fault finders is as old as Christianity itself.

And their successors are to be found in every part of the visible church. We're always uncomfortable with someone who's more devoted to Christ than we are. You know, it's like people call you, maybe you've been called in the past a hyper-Calvinist.

You know what a hyper-Calvinist is? It's anybody who's more Calvinistic than you are, than they were. Okay? To be hyper, to be over the top, to be more devoted to Christ makes you uncomfortable if you run into someone like that.

[15 : 22] That's the problem that these disciples had. And so I find that real devotion to Christ will necessarily make people around you ordinarily uncomfortable.

The second thing I would observe from this passage is that something is dreadfully amiss when our primary concern centers around social and economic issues.

Notice these disciples. We laugh at them a lot of times, don't we? And they deserve it some of the time, too. These disciples, whatever their faults were, they were good calculators.

You remember when our Lord, one time, they set out on the boat across the lake and they forgot to take bread? the disciples go, uh-oh, we forgot to bring bread. And Jesus says to them, look, fellas, how many loaves did we pick up and baskets full of fragments when I fed the 5,000?

They knew the answer, remember? Exactly. They had it stored here. How many when I fed the 3,000? He had the answer. They had the answer. They were good calculators.

[16 : 37] And as soon as this woman came in and poured this expensive oil, they immediately calculated the price it was worth. They were bean counters, these disciples, all right?

Not just Judas, the whole bunch of them. You know how much that's worth? We know how much that's worth. Their primary concern was around economic issues.

Not only that, they were interested in social welfare. This could have been sold and given to the poor. You see? Now, you know why the government tolerates this building?

Tolerates you being here as a church? Because the government considers this an extension of their welfare agency. And as long as you give to the poor and as long as you help people out, it takes them off the government's dole to some extent, and they tolerate.

There's going to be a time when they don't do that anymore, and they're going to have no use for you whatsoever. But you see, these disciples would fit in well with that mentality. How much it's worth?

[17 : 43] It could have been given to the poor. And I submit to you that something is dreadfully amiss when our concern as a church centers around social and economic issues.

That's all they thought about. You see their response. Here's what it's worth. Here's what could have been done with it. It could have been given to the poor. something is wrong if that becomes our center of focus.

The third thing I would have you to note this morning from this text is that it is neither wise nor safe to hold an opinion contrary to Jesus. You're on thin ice.

If you say, well, I have an opinion. I know what Jesus said, but I have a different opinion. You're on thin ice if you're ever able to say that. it is neither wise nor safe to hold an opinion contrary to Jesus. Now, notice the disciples called this what? They said, this is a waste. But Jesus said, no, this is a good work.

[18:54] They're at opposite poles on their opinion about what had happened here. they say it's a waste. Jesus says, no, it's a good work. They're at loggerheads with one another, and it's neither wise nor safe to ever do that.

Not only that, their complaint was not aimed at the woman. Their complaint was aimed at Jesus for not having stopped this.

I want you to see that. What they're actually saying is, Jesus should have stopped this from happening. Because now that she's poured it out, it's wasted. And it was worth X number of dollars, and it could have been used for the poor, and you didn't stop it.

See, that's actually who they're complaining about. Be careful. It's neither wise nor safe to hold an opinion contrary to Jesus. They said it's a waste.

Jesus says it's a good work. Now, I asked Aaron Hoke what translation you tended to use here, and he said the NIV, and it took away one of my points. Most of the modern translations have Jesus saying, leave her alone, she hath wrought a good work on me.

[20:09] But your NIV says what? Doesn't it say a beautiful work? Or a beautiful thing? Is that what it says? What is it? A beautiful thing.

I was going to tell you that modern translations do not differentiate two Greek words that are translated good and mean good. There's one word which means good, and it has an aesthetic quality about it.

Beautiful. And there's another word which means good, but it has an ethical quality about it. All right? And I was going to ask you, which do you think our Lord used at this point?

good. The word that means aesthetically good, or the word that means ethically good. The problem is you're reading the NIV and it's already made the decision for you, and it's right.

It's the word which means beautiful, or pleasant, or symmetrical. Doesn't refer to it as being morally good, but it's a beautiful thing that she's done.

[21:12] That's the word that he uses at this point. Well, that being said, have you ever done a good work? Have you? You think, well, I hope so, I think so.

How do you know? How do you know if it was a good work? Maybe other people thought it was good, or they thought it was beautiful that you did such a thing, but was it really good?

Here is a place where our Lord himself tells us that what had happened was a good work. So if you're confused about what a good work might be, here's a place where something is done and our Lord himself labels it and says, this is a good work.

All right? Well, maybe we can learn something then from that. What do good works look like? Well, there are four things about what she did here that our Lord calls a good work. And if you do a good work or have ever done a good work, it must have these four ingredients.

All right? So if you've ever done a good work, match it up with these four things. Number one, notice its punctuality. It says, she has anointed my body beforehand.

[22:25] Well, that's a good time to do that. It's a time when it can be appreciated. It's a time when its lesson can be learned. It was done in a good works are always time sensitive.

Okay? I remember, I really haven't got time to tell you this story, but I remember 50 years ago, I remember I had a group of young people and I was supposed to kind of babysit them for the summer.

And there was a man who was supposedly a budding evangelist and he was trying out his wares as to whether he had what it took. And so we were invited, myself and my young people were invited to come over and listen to this fellow preach.

He was going to use us as a trial congregation to see if he could be an evangelist and one of these traveling fellows. And so we went over on a Friday night, I remember, and you could tell this fellow

was really trying hard.

And he had studied the idea of being in the pulpit. And he was trying to copy the best of his examples that he'd ever seen.

[23:33] The problem was he wasn't very good at it. And so I can't remember anything that he said and I remember it was a hot night and he went way too long. But the one thing that was I couldn't hardly stop from laughing at that point.

He had his hand always in his pocket. And he would say, repent. And every time he'd make an emphatic gesture like this, it was always a half second too late.

And I think it was in his notes. Do this now. But it was on the next line. So he didn't see it. You know what the problem was?

It was mistimed. Now good works are not good unless they're punctual. They're time sensitive. And if you have ever done a good work, it had to be done in a certain time frame.

Number one. Number two. Notice it's unaffected simplicity. It's unaffected simplicity. He said, leave her alone.

[24:38] She hath wrought a good work on me. On me. It had one focus. It had one idea. No matter whether the fragrance filled the whole room and everyone enjoyed it, she didn't care.

She had one central interest. It was unaffected in its simplicity. And notice that when she did this, she ignored two things. Number one, she ignored the disciples.

She didn't pause to kiss Peter's ring as she went by. She wasn't interested in what they thought. It was on Christ and him alone. You know who else she ignored?

The poor. This could have been sold and given to the poor. She said, I don't care about the poor. I'm going to give this to Christ. It was a good work because of its unaffected simplicity.

Again, Spurgeon said, it was of no immediate benefit to anybody else, nor was it meant to be. She did not aim at pleasing Judas, and if so, and if Judas is not pleased, she's not disappointed.

[25:44] It had unaffected simplicity, and it was aimed at Christ and Christ alone. Number three, have you ever done a good work? Must have punctuality, unaffected simplicity, and number three, its lack of annotation.

Its lack of annotation. Do you notice that she never said a word? This was all action. There was no annotation belonging to it at all.

In fact, again, Spurgeon said, she did not say a word. There is such a thing as spoiling what you do by making a great fuss about it. If you make a great fuss about it, it's not a good work anymore.

He goes on to say, moreover, there is such a thing as talking so much afterwards that spoils it. But she didn't say anything at the beginning, during, or at the end.

It was all action. It was no annotation whatsoever. Punctuality, unaffected simplicity, lack of annotation, and fourthly, its unconsciousness of return.

[26:55] She didn't expect anything back. In fact, once the oil was poured out, it was gone. And she expected nothing. And she was no doubt, as I said at the beginning, surprised at what Jesus did in response, and said.

So if you've ever done a good work, it needs to have those elements about it for it to be good, because here is a work which Jesus specifically said was good.

Notice in the fourth place, that Jesus will rise for the defense of his people. You really don't need to defend yourself.

Jesus will rise for the defense of his people. Now, what this woman would have done was probably just left with the disgust of the disciples behind her back, but she wasn't allowed to do so because Jesus stood up for her.

And notice again what he says. He says, let her alone, verse 6, let her alone, why trouble ye her?

[28:07] And then he goes on to tell why. Now, there's a problem with text. Your memory verse this morning, all right, speaks of the importance of the word of God for us.

and God has given us graciously his word in the form of a book. And this book is words on a page.

And we're very thankful for it, don't get me wrong, but there's a problem with text. It doesn't tell us the tone in which something was said. Now, Greek is a little better than English, but we have to add all kinds of words to try to set the stage or the tone in the way of something is said.

Notice what it says in verse 6, Jesus said, let her alone. How do you think he said those words?

Was it kind of, come on fellas, give her some slack?

You think that's what he said? Come on, just back off. It's not a big deal. Just let her alone, all right? Let's not make a scene here at supper.

[29 : 17] Just let her alone. You think he said it that way? It's an aorist imperative in the grammar of the original language of the New Testament. It's perhaps the strongest way that it could be stated, and I believe, although I'm reading between the lines or setting the tone of these words, but I think he said something like this, get away from her.

Get away from her. Get away from her. What do you think? And I think all the disciples, yes, sir. Get away from her. I think that's what he said. I don't think there was any doubt in their mind of what he meant. He rose for the defense of this woman.

Not only that, I could add this at this point, you are surely confused if you insinuate from the New Testament that the gospel is demeaning to women. Whoever this woman was, we don't have any idea, Jesus stands for her defense.

That's a very comforting thought to me. Jesus will defend his people. And here's a good example of him doing exactly that. Get away from her, Jesus says to these disciples.

[30 : 39] disciples. I doubt if they forgot the tone ever in which he said those words. Now the fifth and the last thing I would have you to note from this passage is that we are mostly unaware of the good we do when we have done what we can.

That too is a comforting thought. We tend to itemize in our own minds what we might have done that's worth something. Very often we've done a lot and we don't even list it. we don't even know that we've done it.

And such was the case with this woman. She didn't know the significance or at least the significance that Jesus was willing to put upon this simple act. And she was as amazed as anyone more than anyone when he said these words.

She hath anointed my body beforehand for the burying. Verily I say unto you wheresoever the gospel is preached in the whole world what she has done is going to be remembered.

And you can see her thinking it is it is we are mostly unaware of the good we do when we have done what we can.

[31 : 54] She received the censure of the disciples the envy of the poor but she found the advocacy of Jesus.

She was as Spurgeon once said in another place preserved in the amber of inspiration. It's written here in the Bible what she did.

And she received the encomium of all gospel history. She did more than she expected when she did what she could.

J.C. Rouse says this the deeds and titles of many a king in general are completely forgotten as if written in the sand. But the act of this one humble woman is recorded in the Bible and is known all over the globe.

Lenski his commentary on Mark tells us the sweet odor of her perfume has literally filled the world. And again Spurgeon says this woman has been a preacher to 19 centuries.

[33 : 10] Remember when he was writing at the end of the 19th century. This woman has been a preacher to 19 centuries. The influence of that alabaster box is not exhausted to this day and will never be.

Okay? Now that's my last observation. Time is almost gone, but let me suggest something to you. This may not happen, but let's pretend that it might. You go to work tomorrow morning or you're on the phone to some friend and just perhaps they say to you, did you go to church yesterday?

And you reply, you know that I did. I go to church every Sunday. And they say, well, and you can say to them then, and by the way, prophecy was fulfilled in our church yesterday.

And they might reply, don't you go to that church where John Haney preaches? You guys sit there and listen. He preaches, you listen.

He preaches, you listen. I know what goes on there. That's all you do. Nothing ever happens there. Except that. You pay attention to the Bible and then you leave and come home.

[34 : 29] You're telling me that something actually happened there yesterday? Yeah. Something happened there yesterday. What was it? Prophecy was fulfilled in our church yesterday.

Really? Now, you can explain what you mean by that. Notice what the Bible says. Wherever the gospel is preached, what this woman has done is going to be mentioned about her. Prophecy is fulfilled right now.

Because here we are, 2,000 years later, still talking about this woman. And that's exactly what Jesus said was going to happen. Prophecy is fulfilled in your ears today.

Because we have thought about this woman who did what she could and did more than she expected. Simple enough, I hope it's clear.

I hope John is right. Let's bow together in prayer. Father, thank you today for the gathering of God's people. Thank you for this woman who did what she could. Bless us, we pray, to measure our good works according to our Lord's designation.

[35 : 36] We thank you for your kindness to us in rising for the defense of your people. Do it even today, we pray, for we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.