

Hands Together through Acts of Kindness

Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9



Materials needed: White board, black board or paper for listing acts of kindness. Bibles for all.

Discussion:

Before you turn to the scripture and study, discuss acts of kindness you have experienced or witnessed. Make a list of these for all to see and for reference later. What made these acts, either given or received, special? Would you describe these acts as “Christian”? What is the difference between Christian acts and those that are in the fashion of “pass it forward” (someone does something nice to you, so you pass that niceness on to someone else)? Which of these acts would you consider to be a response to God’s commandments?

Bible Study:

Read Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9. Take turns reading or choose one reader, but have everyone follow along in their Bibles. If you wish to take the time, you can also read the story in John 12:1-8 and Luke 7:36-50. The question we are looking at will be “When are we called to be extravagant in our acts of kindness?”

Variations of this beautiful story of a woman anointing Jesus is found in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark’s story are very similar. John adds the information that the woman anointing Jesus was Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha. Luke’s story has some striking differences, and it is wondered if it is the same story at all. Luke identifies the homeowner as Simon the Pharisee instead of Simon the Leper. The woman, identified by Luke as a sinner, anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair.

In Matthew and Mark’s version, the disciples gathered for a meal before Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time. It was customary for people in Biblical times to recline on low benches or pillows rather than sit in chairs while eating. They would lie on the couch, resting on the left elbow and using the right hand to take their food. In the first part of Matthew 26 right before our story, Jesus told the disciples “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” In the few verses preceding the story in Mark, the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. Jesus had warned the disciples several times about His death, but they either did not want to hear or they did not understand what it meant. Yet, at dinner, a woman approached Jesus and performed an act that indicated that she not only heard His word about His death, but she knew how to respond.

William Barclay mentioned in his commentary on Mark that it was the custom at that time to pour a few drops of perfume on guests when they arrived at a house or sat down to a meal. So, it would not have seemed strange that the woman would approach Jesus with the jar of perfume. But she did not give just a little, she gave it all. She broke the bottle and poured all the contents over Jesus. Joanna Weaver in *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World* writes:

That’s extravagant love. The kind of love that disregards everything else so it can focus on one thing alone: the object of that love. The kind of love that sacrifices everything, only wishing it had more to give. Nothing is too precious. Nothing is too exorbitant. The heart demands we give – and give all. (159)

William Barkley in his commentary on Matthew states the following:

Love never calculates; love never thinks how little it can decently give; love's one desire is to give to the uttermost limits; and, when it has given all it has to give, it still thinks the gift too little. We have not even begun to be Christian if we think of giving to Christ and to His Church in terms of as little as we respectably can. (364)

Mary (named in John's account), who sat at the feet of Jesus, knew His heart in ways the others did not. Are we, like her sister Martha, so busy worrying about what we are doing "for" Jesus that we miss what He is saying? Do we spend time at His feet so we can know His heart?

The disciples reacted in a negative way toward the woman's extravagant use of the oil. The oil that was used was identified as nard, a perfume made from the root of a plant grown mainly in India. It was extremely costly and was known for its strong fragrance. Its cost was stated to be more than 300 denarii or more than a year's wages for most. It was the same perfume used by the woman that Solomon praised in his Song of Solomon (1:12, 4:13). The jar the oil came in was alabaster, a fairly common, soft, semitransparent, marble-like mineral. It was easily carved so used for ornate jars, boxes, vases and flasks.

The disciples' reaction could have been one of practicality. They declared the oil could have been sold and given to the poor. It should be noted that giving to the poor was expected of pilgrims at the feast of the Passover, so they may have been looking at how they could fulfill that expectation. Their thinking could have been: "We are struggling to come up with something for the poor and here comes this woman with this extravagant waste. How dare she? Why, look how many mouths we could have fed."

When Jesus stated, "The poor you will always have with you", he was actually referencing Deuteronomy 15:11 which reads, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." This scripture is not an excuse to ignore the poor because they will always be with us. Rather, it is an encouragement for us to always be looking for ways to help the poor whenever we can. The opportunity is always there. However, there are special opportunities that arise that may be once in a lifetime opportunities. It may be to respond to a call to ministry, a special mission trip, a call to give of ourselves beyond what we think we are capable. These are not everyday opportunities. Like the woman in our story, we need to be watching, waiting, and ready to respond extravagantly.

Another story in the Bible that shows an extravagant action causing an indignant reaction is the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and the reaction of his wife, Michal who was also Saul's daughter. **Read the story from 2 Samuel 6:12-23.** David was finally bringing the Ark into his city. His joy was uncontainable. He danced before the Lord "with all his might". *The Message* has verses 12-14 as follows: "celebrating extravagantly all the way, with frequent sacrifices of choice bulls. David, ceremonially dressed in priest's linen, danced with great abandon before God."

Michal's reaction was one of indignation. In verse 20, she said to David, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!" David responded to Michal, "It was before the Lord, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel—I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor." How did the Lord respond to Michal's indignation? She was childless until her death.

Max Lucado says this of David in his book *Facing your Giants*:

Scripture doesn't portray David dancing at any other time. He did no death dance over Goliath. He never scooted the boot among the Philistines. He didn't inaugurate his term as king with a waltz or dedicated Jerusalem with a ballroom swirl. But when God came to town, he couldn't sit still. Maybe God wonders how we do. Do we not enjoy what David wanted? The presence of God. Jesus promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Yet, how long since we rolled back the rug and celebrated the night away because of this? (117)

Was God offended at David's dancing? It does not appear so. In fact, Lucado suggests God was David's dance partner.

In defense of her action, Jesus said the woman who anointed Him had done a lovely, beautiful or good thing depending on the translation. The Greek has two words for "good". *Agathos* describes a thing which is morally good. *Kalos* describes a thing which is not only good, but lovely. Good can be harsh. Lovely is soft. Good can be controlling. Lovely is charming. Good can be unattractive. Lovely is winsome. How different the attitude of this woman, willing to be extravagant in her expression of love toward Jesus, and the disciples looking to fulfill a command. Unlike Michal who remained barren, Jesus said this woman's story would be told wherever the gospel was proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Discussion:

I believe most of us would want to identify with the woman rather than the disciples in this story. Yet, as we consider how we would have reacted, I think we need to ask some questions:

1. Have we ever acted as the disciples did and get "indignant" with the actions of others, especially those in the church? Where do we get angry and offended? How do we react when "it" is done differently than how we think it should be done? How do we react toward someone who is displaying exuberant worship or prayer?
2. Has our knowledge of "God with us" become ho-hum? Is our view of God so small that He only gets a glance from us at Sunday worship? Has Sunday mornings become one of gossiping with pew neighbors, discussing the unruly actions of the children in the sanctuary, and counting the attendees rather than listening for God to speak? Is our God so impersonal that He gets more yawns from us than WOWs? And when we realize there have not been WOWs in worship late, do we blame the minister?
3. Have we ever been accused of going overboard in our acts of kindness or our acts of worship?
Don't you think you're overdoing it with this religious stuff?
Why spend so much time in prayer? God knows what we need anyway.
Why go overseas as a missionary? Look what you are giving up.
You are going to the homeless shelter again?
You need to look out for yourself; no one else will.

Review the lists made at the beginning of the lesson. These acts of kindness were more than likely done in good faith and with a giving heart. But, are we just coasting? Has our work with the poor become duty? The opportunities for kindness are always before us. Respond to these opportunities,

and respond well. But, we need to be careful of that point where our spirits slip into neutral. Are we listening to that call to become extravagant in our response to God? Being extravagant is not for a show. It is, like the woman in our story, hearing the heart of Jesus and responding with all we have.

Prayer:

Lord, forgive us when our giving becomes rote. Help us to fine tune our hearing, so we can hear your heart's cry and respond wholly, completely. Forgive us when we say we can't or we don't know how or we don't want to. Show us, Lord, how to respond with all our body, mind and strength. Amen.

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