

MARY MAGDALENE AND THE CROSS

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WHAT CAN THE TRUTH OF THE CROSS DO FOR ONE WHOSE LIFE HAS BEEN A TRAGIC MESS? Here's a basket-case woman so badly twisted out of shape that the Bible says "seven devils" had control of her. Mark 16:9.

"And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.

"But there were some who were indignant among themselves,¹ and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii² and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply.

"But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always.

¹ These "some" are identified not as the pagan Romans or Greeks who might have been present, nor as the unbelieving Jews, but as none other than Jesus' own disciples! And the instigator of their murmuring turns out to be none other than Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. So blinded were the Eleven! They could do nothing other than to say "amen" to his disloyal spirit, See Matthew 26:8; John 12:4, 5.

² A denarius was a Greek coin equivalent in value to a workingman's wage for a day, See Matthew 20:2. Three hundred would be about a year's wages.

"She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." Mark 14:3-9.

When Mary broke the alabaster flask of precious ointment to anoint Jesus, she was giving to the world her unconscious expression of that same spirit of love and sacrifice which Jesus' life and death exemplified. Thus Mary's act has special meaning for us as an illustration of the truth of the cross,

This poignant act at Bethany is the most beautiful, heart-touching deed ever performed by a repentant sinner.³ It was welcome evidence to Jesus and to the watching universe that humanity is indeed capable of attaining a profound heart appreciation of the sacrifice Jesus made. Mary had no righteousness of her own; but her Savior's righteousness had been truly imparted to her.

Imagine how her noble deed cheered the heart of the Savior in His darkest hours! No mighty angel from heaven could have brought to Him the comfort which the memory of her tearful sacrifice imparted; for in her sacrificial love to Him He discerned a pledge of His eventual joy. The travail of His soul will purchase for Him a precious reward—the making of many righteous through "faith which works through love." Galatians 5:6.

³ How can one who disbelieves that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God explain the amazing fact that Jesus is the only man in world history who has had His feet washed with tears?

The evoking of such repentant love in human hearts changes lives. Surely this is the end to be achieved by the Savior's sacrifice!

**A DEBT TO CHRIST,
AND A DEBT TO THIS WOMAN!**

The world may owe something to Mary which it has never recognized for thus encouraging the sorely tempted One in His time of greatest need. Surely the cold-hearted Twelve gave Him no such comfort as did Mary, whom they despised!

But Mary knew not why she had been moved to make this strange, prodigal offering. Informed only by the inscrutable yet infallible reason of love, she had spent her all to buy this extravagant ointment. What really happened was that she anointed beforehand Christ's body for the burial.

She was so completely unable to defend her action before the reproachful disciples that Jesus Himself had to come to her rescue. In undertaking her defense before the unfeeling obtuseness of the Twelve, He transformed the incident into a lesson on the meaning of the cross—something the church of today hungers to understand.

In fact, from what He said, a sympathetic appreciation of Mary's mysterious deed is necessary if we would understand the gospel itself. Jesus bespoke for her act the high regard of His followers in all ages: "Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the whole world, what this woman did will also be spoken of as a memorial to her." Infinitely better than any marble inscription for a Roman emperor!

Here is reason enough for giving Mary our attention.

WHY DID JESUS PRAISE HER SO EXTRAVAGANTLY?

Not for her sake, but for the sake of "this gospel" the fragrance of her deed is to be published abroad like this. Here is the key to all that is perplexing in this strange event. *Mary was preaching a sermon.*

- Her act illuminates the gospel and casts into sharp and grand relief its principles of love, sacrifice, and magnificence.

- Likewise the faultfinding of the disciples exposes our natural human reaction to the tender love revealed at the cross.

- Had we been present on the occasion, we would have found it difficult not to take our stand with Judas and the other disciples. Mary had done something that was to all human appearance irrational and wasteful. "Three hundred denarii" the value of the ointment, represented the wages of a laboring man for a full year, "a denarius a day" being the usual pay. Matthew 20:2. Such a sum would probably have been sufficient to provide a small meal for five thousand men "besides women and children," according to Philip's cautious estimate. John 6:7; Matthew 14:21.

If we did not know the outcome of this drama of Bethany, what would we have thought of this apparently senseless extravagance? How many church managers and committee members would approve of such an expenditure? Who among us would not have sympathized decidedly with the disciples in their feelings of outrage? This emotionally disturbed woman deserves rebuke!

We would find our hearts ready to second Judas's motion of censure: "Why was not this fragrant oil sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

**BUT JESUS HIMSELF STEPS IN
TO DEFEND MARY.**

According to our natural judgment, we would be ready to agree with Judas. Would it not be a more sober, practical act of devotion for Mary to use a few drops of the precious ointment to anoint His head, and then sell the balance for the benefit of the poor? We might feel a vague sense of thankfulness that such zealots as Mary are only a small minority in the church today.

But even more perplexing is the apparently reckless extravagance with which Jesus defended her. We are inclined to think He might have said something nice to her, tenderly commending the warmth of her affection while gently deploring this wild extravagance of its expression. He could have kindly encouraged her and at the same time placated the indignation of the Twelve.

Not so! While the hapless penitent tries to escape unnoticed, overwhelmed with confusion and embarrassment, fearing that her sister Martha and possibly even Jesus will think her foolish and improvident, Jesus lifts His voice above the murmuring of the disciples: "Let her alone, Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me." Far from approving the disciples' apparent regard for the poor, He places an entirely different interpretation on Mary's motive. It was a far truer charity. Her deed was a parable of divine love, a

vehicle for proclaiming the gospel. Jesus was forced to defend her, for in so doing He was defending Himself and His cross. He was, in fact, imparting to her deed a symbolic meaning of which she herself was ignorant.

■ In the alabaster bottle, broken at His feet, He discerned His body, broken and bruised for us.

■ In the precious ointment running to waste on the floor, He saw His blood "shed for many for the remission of sins;" yet rejected and despised by most of them.

■ In the motive that prompted Mary's act—her heartbroken, repentant love for Him—Jesus saw the true reflection of His love for us.

■ In her sacrifice to purchase the ointment with the sum total of her hard-earned savings, He saw the utter emptying of Himself in the role of the divine Lover of our souls.

■ In her apparent extravagance He saw the magnificence of Heaven's offering poured out sufficient to save a world, yet accepted by only a handful of its inhabitants.

Thus was Jesus obliged to defend His wondrous cross before those who should have had hearts to appreciate its unutterable worth.

**PATHETICALLY, WE SEE OURSELVES IN THE
COLD-HEARTED SIMON AND THE TWELVE.**

Judas had only sneers of contempt for the purest and holiest love eternity had known; and the slow-hearted, unappreciative disciples could only follow the promptings of his selfish criticism. Dare we think ourselves holier than they?

Hardly. We do well to remember that Mary was informed by the mysterious promptings of the Holy Spirit, an inspiration that stoops to give no reason. Only in a broken and a contrite heart can that inspiration find entrance.

The disciples were conscious of no such promptings, yet they had privately received clear teachings about Jesus' approaching death that Mary likely had not heard. They should have had preparatory understanding of the cross. But now an untaught woman with a penitent heart preached a sermon on the cross more eloquent even than Peter's at Pentecost, a sermon that to this day thrills the hearts of those who ponder its meaning. Thus we see that acquaintance with the historical details of the crucifixion is nothing compared with a heart appreciation of it. If flesh and blood cannot understand the doctrine of Christ's person, as the Savior said at Caesarea Philippi, neither can flesh and blood understand the doctrine of the cross.

MARY'S DEED ILLUSTRATES CHRIST'S SACRIFICE FOR US.

Consider the *motive* that prompted Mary. It was not for any hope of reward or even desire for praise that she did this unusual act. She had hoped to do it unnoticed. Only the sudden fragrance that filled the room betrayed her. Love alone was her guiding principle, love that in turn was a reflection of Jesus' love for sinners.

What was the motive that led Jesus to His cross? Theologians may write their ponderous tomes in efforts to account for the strange act at Calvary, only

to return, weary at last, to the realization that no reason can be given: love alone was the motive.

How encouraging to Jesus to see reflected in Mary the image of His own character! In a sinner, do you ask? Yes, in "a woman . . . who was a sinner" (Luke 7:37) and a grievous one at that, He saw Himself reflected.

As a positive print of a photograph from a negative, He saw in her love the print or likeness of His own pattern-love. "Reproach has broken My heart;" He said (Psalm 69:20); repentance had now broken her heart through the ministry of His own broken heart

Wonder, O heavens, and be astonished, O earth, for the plan of salvation is a success! Whether the divine risk of Calvary is as yet seen to be justified so far as the cold-hearted Twelve are concerned, it is a success for the daughter of Bethany! The sacrifice of God in Christ has elicited from her soul its complementary sacrifice: "a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart," which God, fortunately different from the disciples, will "not despise." Psalm 51:17.

AGAIN CONSIDER THE SACRIFICE OF MARY'S DEED.

It shines brightest when compared with the sacrifice of Jesus' offering Himself for us. In commending her, He said, "She has done what she could the intent being that she had done *all* that she could. He too "has done what [He] could!" If Mary was ever rewarded in a temporal way for the almost endless days of humble toil expended for the purchase of the ointment, we do not know. But O that He who emptied Himself—"humbled Himself and became obedient to death, . . . even the death of the cross"

(Philippians 2:8)—might find ample reward for His sacrifice! Cannot we who have no alabaster flask of ointment to break upon His head at least find tears with which to wash those feet pierced for us? O Jesus, can You not find in us “Seven devils” to cast out, that we might learn to love You as Mary did?

THE *MAGNIFICENCE OF MARY’S DEED SHINES BRIGHTEST WHEN LIKENED TO THAT OF JESUS’ SACRIFICE.*

The disciples’ reasoning was, Why not use a little ointment? Why this extravagance with something so precious? Look, it’s running to waste on the floor! Three hundred silver coins gone down the drain! just a few drops on His head would have been enough, Mary!

So we would have reasoned!

To this day the human heart, when uninformed by inspiration, is unable to appreciate the magnificence of Calvary’s sacrifice.

■ Why give the divine life “a ransom for many” when only a few will respond?

■ Why pour out a Niagara of self-sacrificing love when all but a trickle seemingly runs to waste?

■ The sacrifice made was sufficient to redeem all of earth’s billions of sinners; why pay such a price when the ultimate returns will be so meager?

■ Why should the divine Form be racked with grief and tears over “Jeruselems” that know not of and care not for the day of their visitation?

■ Why not restrict the love and its expression to the few who will respond to its appeal rather than pour out such an infinite waste that seems so useless?⁴

Thus did the disciples reason concerning Mary’s magnificence; thus do many reason today concerning Him of whom her love was but a type.

To answer we can only say that love is never genuine unless it is prodigal-wasteful. Love never stints, never calculates. Mary’s “very precious” alabaster flask of ointment was not bought at a bargain sale. She paid the full price for the finest that could be purchased with no grudging thought of saving anything. One can imagine her asking the shopkeeper for some ointment. Seeing in her only a poor peasant, he suggests a cheap preparation, “Have you nothing better?” she asks.

“Yes, I have a better quality, but it will cost you two hundred denarii.”

“Do you have anything still better than this?” she persists.

“Yes, I have only the very finest and most expensive, but it will cost three hundred. You can’t afford that, Mary. It’s only for a king or emperor!” “Let me have it,” she replies. With her motive of love, she can do nothing less.

Could God, who is Himself love, do less than His utmost? He thought not of how to effect the salvation of the redeemed at the least possible cost to Himself. Heaven, the “ivory palaces,” the devotion of a myriad of angels, the thrones of an infinite

⁴ This reasoning is held by many Christians today who adhere to strict Calvinistic predeterminism. They feel that Christ died only for the elect.

universe, life eternal, yes, the precious companionship of the Father, *all* Christ freely spent in the giving of Himself. An ocean of the water of life to be expended lavishly, and the only returns to be a few fragile earthen vessels filled with human tears of love! How infinitely precious must those “bottles” (Psalm 56:8) be to Him! “O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption.” Psalm 130:7.

SIMON THE LEPER’S COLD REACTION TO MARY’S DEED DISTURBS US.

The host had been a silent witness to Mary’s act of devotion. He seemed not to be concerned as were the Twelve with its extravagance. Darker surmisings even than those were coursing through his soul, honest as he was.

He had not yet accepted Jesus as a Savior, though he had hoped that He might indeed prove Himself to be the Messiah. Having experienced the thrill of a miraculous healing, he had condescended now to invite the Galilean and His rude followers to this social occasion in order to express his gratitude. In so doing, he avoided giving Jesus even the honor of recognition as a social equal. He offered Him no kiss of welcome, no ointment for His head, not even water for His feet, the smallest elementary courtesy in the Middle East of that day.

Beholding the sublime spectacle of a repentant sinner wiping the tearstained feet of the world’s Savior with her hair, Simon reasoned darkly within himself, “This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.” Luke 7:39. How

little does the self-righteous heart discern the credentials of divinity!

In the parable by which He sought to enlighten poor Simon, Jesus reveals the lesson of the glory of the cross that enlightens every honest heart that will pause long enough to survey the wondrous scene:

“There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?’ Simon answered and said, ‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’ ‘And He said to him, ‘You have rightly judged.’” Luke 7:41-43.

Simon, having been the instrument in leading Mary into sin originally, was clearly the debtor owing “five hundred denarii” not fifty. By contrasting Simon’s cold-hearted lovelessness with the warm devotion of Mary, Jesus tactfully revealed to his darkened mind and heart the truly astounding realization that Mary’s repentant love should have been his if the one forgiven most should love most.

More than seven devils had been troubling Simon! He, the self-righteous one, was bothered with an eighth, the evil spirit of self-righteousness which hid the presence of the other seven. But the light even now shining from the cross illumined Simons heart and disclosed to him the almost hopeless sinner that he was. Only the infinite pity of Jesus saved him from an ultimate ruin greater than Mary’s had been. Simon could have also sung the hymn, “Jesus, Lover of my soul,” as Mary could.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE LOVE MUCH

AND SOME LOVE LITTLE?

The parable of Jesus was not intended to show that different degrees of obligation should be felt by different sinners. Both Simon and Mary were infinitely and eternally in debt to the divine Creditor. Mary's love however was due to the simple fact that she knew she was a sinner and had been forgiven much. Simon had been forgiven little because he *felt* that he had sinned but little.

Will anyone in God's eternal kingdom go about feeling superior to others? "I never did anything bad like the common run of people! I came from a good family and grew up on the right side of the tracks! My friends weren't the ordinary drop-outs, living loosely, or using drugs. I was pretty good on my own, and all I needed was a slight push from Christ to get me into the kingdom!"

Wouldn't such words seem more appropriate coming from some whiner outside the gates of the city than from someone inside?

O for Mary's tender conscience! If Paul could call himself "the chief of sinners;" can we do less? What light the doctrine of the cross may shed upon the unfeeling heart of Laodicea, the last of the great seven churches of all history! Lukewarm, self-righteous saints will trail behind the publicans and harlots who, like Mary, will repent. "Many that are first shall be last; and the last first."