



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Mark 14:1-11**  
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This scene is so typical of what happens when you have Jesus to dinner. We never have Jesus to dinner in any of the Gospel stories and all goes smoothly, and everyone makes polite conversation, and when it's over everyone just had a nice time together. It's always one faux pas after another. Jesus offends the host or somebody. How should we say it? Jesus did not come down to fit into our pleasantries and niceties. There's even an edge of scandal in this story, but Jesus always risked that because Jesus was after just something extraordinary. How should we say it? In this instance, there's a woman at the meal and she produces a pottery flask, and she breaks off the tip of it and begins to pour some oil on Jesus' head and people look at the oil and they smell it and someone says, "I think it's from India and I think it's ridiculously expensive, I saw some once." They began to calculate the worth of this oil that has just been poured out that is soaking into Jesus' clothing and is running down the cracks of the floor. Someone calculates "It must be worth 300 denarii," which for the average worker is the amount of money that you would make in a year, a year's salary just gone, and they're mortified by this. There's always somebody around in a huff when this sort of thing happens, and in this case, someone calculates the worth of the oil that has been wasted, and they say, "That 300 denarii should have been given to the poor." They are indignant. "It should have been given to the poor."

I wish I had 300 denarii for every time somebody complained about what money should have been given to the poor. You know, sometimes I think our indignation over what somebody else ought to be doing for the poor exceeds our own generosity. Let me say that again – nobody's gotten that line all morning – I've tried it. Sometimes I think our indignation over what somebody else ought to be giving to the poor exceeds our generosity by quite a large margin. Jesus startles us in this case. He says, "You'll always have the poor with you." That sounds a little bit cynical, like, Why bother with the poor? You're always going to have them. But the people who heard Jesus say that... We're going through a year through the Bible, those who heard it had been through years through the Bible. Their whole lives were about the Bible. They knew the Bible backward and forward, and when they heard Jesus say this, they would have recognized "Ah, it's a quotation from Deuteronomy Chapter 15." In Deuteronomy Chapter 15, God through Moses says to the people, "Always be generous with the poor. Always open your hand to the needy for you will always have them with you. There's never a vacation from this. There's never a break from this. There will always be poor. Always open your hand generously to them." Jesus, of course, believes that it is a good thing to help the poor. It's part of our mission. It's the big thing that we're about. We have so much going on in our church in this economic crisis. We're working overtime doing more than we've ever done to try to help the poor in the city of Charlotte, people who are sleeping under the bridges, people who don't have food, people who can't see a doctor. We're doing so much for them.

We have a group in Liberia right now. It's very cool what they have going there. They're starting some microfinance, a little business, so people there can prosper and do well. Three weeks ago I was in Haiti. Very, very poor people there. We do work in Haiti. We're not going to banish poverty in Haiti. You know, if we go there for some number of years, Bayonnais, Haiti, isn't going to become Las Vegas. We hope not. There will always be poverty in Haiti. But Jesus says you always have the poor with you. We always extend an open hand to the needy. In this story, Jesus is after something even deeper than doing good for the poor. He praises this woman and the reason he praises her is that she simply loves him with total abandon.

If you think about doing good for the poor, you don't have to be a Christian. We don't have a corner on that market, do we? There are atheists out there who do good for the poor. Sometimes the atheist out there does better for the poor than the Christians do, and they make us look bad. You don't have to be a Christian to serve the poor. A lot of people think that's a good idea, but what's peculiar to us is embodied in the story. Jesus invites us into an intimate relationship with him where we love him. This woman alone in the story – the other people are griping, "That money should have been given to the poor" – she alone seems to understand Jesus and love him. She seems to understand that he was God but he left the comforts of Heaven and came down to share our discomforts, our vulnerability. He taught so beautifully. He touched the people nobody else would touch. He healed those who were sick, and he was right on the verge of giving up his life. Instead of defending himself, Jesus let his pure, beautiful, holy body be nailed to an olive tree. He did that out of love for us. She seems to get this, and she loves Jesus with total abandon.

In trying to think about instances where we've seen this happen, I've told some of you about this before, but I would remind you...A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference of Pentecostal clergy. When I got there they didn't have a printed program, so I said, "Where am I on the program?" And they said, "You're right after the first song." I thought, "Oh good," and I was getting my notes together. Well, the first song was like 45 minutes, so I had time, and during the song, my host, who was next to me, he stood up and he started singing the song with everyone else, but then he, as many other people in the room had done, lapsed into kind of free-form. He wasn't singing the song that they were singing any longer. Instead, his hands just drifted up toward the ceiling, and he just over and over for about 20 minutes said, "Oh, Jesus, you are so beautiful. Oh, Jesus, you are so beautiful. Oh Jesus, you are so beautiful." And I was sitting there thinking "What do I have to offer?" We're so calculating, aren't we? We think about Jesus and we say, "What's in it for me? What am I getting out of this?" And he's just saying "Oh, Jesus, you're so beautiful." The bystanders said, "The money should have been given to the poor" and this woman just simply pours out what is of immense value to her because she loves Jesus. She's lost in wonder, love and praise. She anoints Jesus, and he says she did a beautiful thing to me.

I'm not really fussing at you. I'm fussing at all of us. What happens is we need to learn to be generous. We need to learn to be lavished. By nature, we are careful. We calculate. When we invest, we want to see what the payoff is. This even invades our relationships, doesn't it? We go into a relationship and instead of loving with abandon we tend to say, "What am I getting out of this? What's in this for me?" We're always calculating. There are always trade-offs. Don't you have a hankering inside just to love with abandon? Just to be reckless, to throw caution to the wind and love for once in your life? Maybe you remember some point in life when this may have happened. Sometimes young lovers, they're just ga-ga in love, or maybe you've been one of those rabid sports fans, you just lose it up in the stands at some point, or maybe you've loved someone who had been diagnosed with some terrible disease, and you just lose anything, whatever, you don't calculate any longer.

How do we learn to do this? Wendell Berry wrote a lovely poem that I treasure and others who know it treasure it, and I try to remind myself of it periodically. He wrote this: "Friends, every day do something that doesn't compute, love the Lord, love the world, work for nothing, love someone who does not deserve it, ask questions that have no answers, plant sequoias, laugh, be joyful even though you have considered all the facts, lie easy in the shade, practice resurrection." I Googled that the other day and said, "I love that, I'll use that in my sermon." Then I got to thinking what prompted Wendell Berry to say this thing, and I backtracked earlier in the poem where he assesses the messages that we usually hear, which have nothing to do with being reckless. The messages that we usually hear are these: Love the quick profit, want more of everything, be afraid to know your neighbors, be afraid to die. And then you will have a little window in your head. Your mind will become a punch card shut

away in a little drawer and when they want you to buy something they will call you. That's our life. "Get more of everything and when they want me to buy something, they'll call me." We just go through life this way and we're always calculating. Every day do something that doesn't compute. Love the world. Assess all the facts but be joyful anyway. Love the way this woman loved Jesus. She anoints him and he says that she did a beautiful thing.

I was in Duke Divinity School the other day speaking to some would-be clergy, some clergy in training, and I had a little Q&A time and one of them asked me a question. He said, "When you are preaching, what are you trying to get done?" I loved that question, and I thought, When I'm preaching, what am I trying to get done? There are a lot of crazy answers to this, like, I'm trying to entertain you. That's not it. What am I trying to get done? I couldn't quite think how to formulate it and then I stumbled across it. Right now I'm in the middle of Edward Kennedy's autobiography – you know, Sen. Ted Kennedy, who died recently – and it is amazing – I'm loving this story. He talks about being a kid in this incredible Kennedy family, and he's got these phenomenal, overachieving older brothers – it's a great story, and the moment that I love is that he's kind of an underachiever. He's kind of playing, goofing off, not doing as well in school or in sports or anything else as they were doing. And his father sets him down one day – I think he was 11 years old at the time – Joseph Kennedy sits down with little Teddy and has a talk and says this: "Teddy, you can have a serious life or a non-serious life. I'll still love you whichever choice you make, but if you decide to have a non-serious life, I won't have much time for you. You make up your own mind. There are too many children in this family who are having serious lives, who are doing things that are interesting for me to do much with you if you're having a non-serious life." I love that.

I think my challenge to you...Why do I preach week in and week out? Why do we do this for a living? I want you to have a serious faith. What happens to most of us, we kind of have a non-serious faith. We're kind of like young Ted Kennedy, just kind of yeah, yeah, yeah – the others are doing well but I kind of want to have fun today. I won't work so hard. And it's not that God says he won't have time for us. He'll love us either way, whether we have a serious faith or a non-serious faith. But if you have a non-serious faith, it's going to feel like God doesn't have much time for you, and the reason is you have no time for God. No wonder God seems distant where you seem to have a vacant place inside your soul. So the question I have to ask, Are you going to have a serious faith or a non-serious faith? Are we going to slide by and do little charitable acts now and then and let that pass as our faith? Or are we going to look at this woman who breaks the flask and pours out a year's salary worth of oil because she just is lost in wonder, love and praise for this Jesus whom she finds to be so beautiful.

I started listing ways that we could learn and practice this love, this anointing of Jesus, and this sermon was running into many, many pages and several hours and you wouldn't have the patience to hear that, but I did jot down a few things. One is this: When we pray – I've been polling some people lately – and so, be honest with me, how much do you really pray? Don't give the "For the preacher" answer, but how much do you pray? Most people are pretty embarrassed. They kind of slap on a prayer before a meal if they think about it. Maybe they're going to bed at night and slap in another little prayer – oh, I fell asleep and didn't get that prayer finished. And something bad happens, a relative is sick and, oh, then we start really praying. But our regular praying is paltry, isn't it? But think about this, every time you pray, it's not like "Take your medicine, you ought to pray." Think about every time you pray, what you're doing, you're anointing Jesus. When you pray, Jesus says, "That's a beautiful thing." When you stop all the rush or whatever the nonsense is that is so important for you to get done and instead, you just get still, and you just get quiet, and you just talk to Jesus. You don't ask questions like "Is my prayer working? Is this productive or not?" No, no, you just say to Jesus, "I just need to be with you. I just need to be still in your presence for awhile. I just need to

share my heart with you." When we do that, we anoint Jesus, and he looks and says, "That's a beautiful thing."

When we come to worship, when we think about worship, I tend to suspect – correct me if I'm wrong – I look out at you and I see you're watching me – I know kind of what some of you are thinking. You're kind of in a grading mode. You're saying, "That was a pretty good sermon Howell has done, better a couple of weeks ago, just pretty good." You're kind of grading. You heard the choir and said, "That was good." "The flute thing that was great." We're kind of consumers and we say, "What am I getting out of it? What am I getting out of church today?" Did you get anything out of church today? You can think about it very differently. You can come to worship God because when we come into this place, we anoint Jesus, and Jesus says, "It's a beautiful thing." When you come into this place, you're not trying to get anything out of it. You just say, "Oh, Jesus, you're so beautiful. You're so beautiful." Anointing Jesus.

There's another thing, and please don't misunderstand what I'm trying to get said in this. I'm not really talking about dress code and what we ought to wear to church and what we shouldn't wear to church. This gets debated a lot. There are people who say, "They should wear coats and ties and dresses to church." And other people say "Oh, no, no, wear jeans and T-shirts. God doesn't care. You're formal, you're stuffy." We have these debates, and it's just something. I will declare to you I shall never preach in blue jeans, and the reason for this is that I don't look very good in blue jeans – it's just kind of vanity.

I tell you, three Sundays ago I was in Haiti. This was amazing. Now Haiti is the poorest country on earth and I was in the poorest place in Haiti. So this is the poorest place on God's good earth. And I was there on Sunday morning. These people have nothing. They do not have a phone signal, they do not have running water, and they do not have electricity. The children are malnourished, and you can see the orange coloration there as they don't get the vitamins and nutrients that they need. They have nothing. They basically live out of doors in little huts that you can't believe. They have nothing. Sunday morning I went to church. I was underdressed. Everybody in the poorest place on this planet, all the men were wearing suits. They have nothing. Their clothes are just rags, but everybody owns one nice outfit. Little boys, 3 years old, 7 years old, 14 years old, all wore suits, ties. Little girls were in dresses and mothers had made up their hair. Isn't that something? I'm not saying to you, "You've got to wear nice clothes. Go over to Paul Simon." I'm advertising free for Paul Simon all day. He owes me. I'm not saying, "Go over to Paul Simon." It's not about the clothes. You see, what I'm saying...It's that for these people, how shall I say it? They're not like, "What am I going to get out of church today? I want it to be comfortable for me. I wonder if they're going to do the kind of music I dig?" They're not doing that. They're saying "It's Sunday. This is the biggest moment in our lives, and we're going to worship God and it's just the biggest deal. It's so special." I think when God looks down at those Haitians coming to worship, God says, "That's a beautiful thing, that's a beautiful thing."

The question is, What do we bring to our Lord? We kind of slap on a prayer now and then, do a little charitable act now and then and say, "Oh man, I'm a good Christian." You can have a non-serious life or you can have a serious life. You can have a serious faith. Is this the biggest deal? Can we learn how to come in this place and say, "Oh, Jesus, you are so beautiful?" Can we learn to be like this woman? She breaks the flask, she pours it out. She doesn't count the cost. Totally reckless. She does something that just doesn't compute. She loves. We find a beautiful thing to offer to God.