

Exegesis

Vs. 4-5 – Though Mary's act is admired by all today, it wasn't so in the actual moment. Mark's recounting of the events says that "some...scolded her" for what she did (cf. Mar. 14:4-5). Matthew goes even further and tells us that the "some" were actually "disciples" (cf. Matt. 26:8). But it is John who gives us the fullest picture: "Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him, why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?"

With this, we're also reintroduced to the notorious Judas (12:4). The last time he was mentioned was way back in 6:71 when Jesus revealed that there was a "devil" amongst the twelve disciples. And, as John's audience knows, this so-called "disciple" will soon play a pivotal role in Jesus' crucifixion (cf. 13:21-30; 18:1-5). As the one "which should betray [Jesus]," Judas was a devil indeed.

Reminding readers of Judas' treachery is also a helpful interpretive device as it keeps us from reading his words in a favorable light. Because, technically, Judas was right. It isn't an exaggeration to say that 11.5 oz of spikenard could be sold for "three hundred [denarii]." And it was true; that much money could go a long way to help the "poor." Historically, we know three hundred denarii was an average worker's earnings in a year.¹ And, as explained in verses 2-3, spikenard was very costly. Thus, while it did not cost an unfeasible amount (everyone could fathom a year's wage), it was still far more than most people could afford. One would have to be ultra-wealthy with large sums of discretionary income to even consider spending that much. And there's no denying that much capital could do a lot of good for those in need. But, as we'll see, Judas cared only for himself, even when he claimed to care for others. As Carson points out,

“Judas displays a certain utilitarianism that pits pragmatic compassion, concern for the poor, against extravagant, unqualified devotion. If self-righteous piety sometimes snuffs out genuine compassion, it must also be admitted, with shame, that social activism, even that which meets real needs, sometimes masks a spirit that knows nothing of worship and adoration....With Judas Iscariot, the case is far worse: his personal greed for material things masquerades as altruism.”²

¹ Keener (2012), 2:864; Köstenberger (2008), p. 362; Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 208; Morris (1995), p. 513.

² Carson (1991), p. 429.

Vs. 6 - So, yes, Judas was correct. But, as John reminded us, Judas is the betrayer. Even though he makes some valid points, they are made with *criminal* intentions. Our faithful narrator explains, "This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein." Judas' greed is well-attested, given that he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. But only John adds to his rap sheet that he was also a "thief" (cf. 10:1, 8, 10; Mat. 6:19-20). Someone who helps execute an innocent man would have little trouble stealing from the poor. "Judas's disapproval of Mary's actions was related, not to loss of opportunity to do more for the poor, but to his own loss of opportunity to steal from the common purse."³

Interestingly, some significant comparisons can be made between Judas and a number of characters in John's account. For instance, with John outing Judas as a "thief," faithful readers will naturally contrast Jesus' betrayer with the only other place that "thieves" are mentioned in John's account: the Good Shepherd discourse (cf. 10:1-10). There, "thieves and robbers" sneak their way into the sheepfold, causing such havoc that Jesus says their entire purpose is "to steal, kill, and destroy" (10:10). Likewise, Judas snuck into Jesus' entourage. He was no friend of Jesus but a "stranger" (10:5), pilfering Jesus' flock to satisfy his own selfish desires and, eventually, will have a hand in killing Jesus and destroying the disciples' unity (cf. Mat. 26:56).

Using the Good Shepherd discourse again, a further comparison can be made between Judas and the hired hands (cf. 10:11-13). In 10:13, Jesus contrasts the "good shepherd" who cares deeply for the sheep with the "hireling" who abandons the sheep to a pack of wolves because he "careth not for the sheep." Jesus' point is that the hireling cared so long as he got paid and so long as he wasn't put in danger. The flock was nothing more than a job, a means to earn money. But because the hireling used the sheep, he didn't really care for the sheep. Likewise, Judas cared only for the poor because he knew that charity could be a profitable business. Apparently, Judas would take a cut for himself whenever people would donate to Jesus (cf. Lu. 8:3). As the treasurer for the disciples, it would've been easy for him to cook the books and fill his own pockets.

But, contextually, the best comparison to make here is that which compares Judas and Mary. "Mary honors Jesus; Judas betrays him."⁴ Mary selflessly worshipped Jesus, giving all that she had. Judas, on the other hand, selfishly used Jesus, taking as much as he could. He had a keen

³ Kruse (2017), p. 304.

⁴ Thompson (2015), p. 261.

mind that knew the value of money, but he cared little for Mary's worship.⁵ C. J. Wright brings out the comparison best when he says,

“Mary’s act is as open as the sun. Judas’s words are as obscure as the night. The motives of the one are as clear and spontaneous as those of a child. The motives of the other are as hidden and indirect as those of the hireling.... The act of the one is self-/ess: the words of the other are *selfish*. Mary leaves the Feast more devoted than before: Judas leaves it with the seed of treachery growing apace in his mind. In the one case understanding blossoms into devotion: in the other misunderstanding matures into hatred.”⁶

⁵ Morris (1995), p. 513.

⁶ Wright, C. J., *Jesus The Revelation of God His Mission and Message According to St. John*, (London, ENG; Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), p. 268.

Additional Notes

Vs. 2-3 - There is an anointing of Jesus recorded in all four gospels: John 12:1-8, Matt. 26:6-13, Mar. 14:3-9, and Lu. 7:36-38. The simplest explanation is that this is the same event being described from four different perspectives, or there are four separate anointings. However, to claim only one anointing, a person would have to ignore the many points at which these accounts *differ*.⁷ And to claim four anointings, a person would have to ignore the many points at which these accounts *agree*.

So, how many anointings were there? Considering that the outlier among the four anointings is Luke's account, it appears there are at least two. Not only does Luke's anointing occur early in Jesus' ministry, but it takes place in the house of a Pharisee named Simon (cf. Lu. 7:40) who lived somewhere in Galilee, not Bethany (cf. Lu. 5:17). "Simon" was also a common name (cf. Mat. 4:18; 10:2, 4; Lu. 6:15, Ac. 1:13) and need not imply that Simon the Pharisee was the same as "Simon, the leper" (cf. Mat. 26:6; Mar 14:3). Also, unlike Mary, the woman who anointed Jesus is not named and is instead referred to as "a sinner." And rather than being told that spikenard was used, this woman used an unspecified "ointment."⁸ Furthermore, Luke says nothing about the price of the ointment, and rather than a disciple being upset, the offended party is Simon the Pharisee. Lastly, Luke's account ends with the Lord relaying a parable about a moneylender and two debtors, which is absent from Matthew, Mark, and John.

So, what about Matthew, Mark, and John? Matthew and Mark's anointing are nearly identical. There are some differences. For instance, Mark gives the actual value of the ointment, whereas Matthew is content to say it was "very expensive." But all the anomalies are superficial. What little differences there are, indicate divergent writing styles rather than signify two separate events.

Okay, so how does Matthew/Mark compare to John? Interestingly, there are three significant differences. First, Matthew/Mark mentions that the anointing occurred in the house of "Simon the Leper," and they do not note the presence of Lazarus, Martha, or Mary. Secondly, Matthew/Mark do not report that Jesus' feet were anointed, as in John, they only mention his head. And, lastly, it appears like Matthew/Mark says the anointing took place "two days" before the Passover (cf. Mat. 26:2; Mar. 14:1) and after the Triumphal Entry (cf. Matt. 21:1-11,

⁷ Carson (1991), p. 425, "only [an] unbridled imagination can offer adequate reasons to explain why so many difference would have been invented."

⁸ The Greek word used is **μύρον** (*myron*) and is also used in the other accounts, though with **νάρδος** (*nardos*) to indicate which kind.

Mar. 11:1-11) while John places it earlier in the passion week (cf. 12:1) and just before the Triumphal Entry (12:12-18).

However, these discrepancies can be explained. That John fails to mention "Simon the Leper" is of no consequence since Lazarus could've been known by that name. It was common for people to have different names during this time (i.e., Simon=Cephas=Peter, Matthew=Levi, Judas=Iscaariot, Thomas=Didymus, etc.).⁹ Concerning his feet, all three accounts agree Jesus was anointed with an excessive amount of spikenard. That both his head and feet were anointed is perfectly reasonable. Lastly, Matthew/Mark's time stamp of "two days" before the Passover is, technically, detached from their actual account of the anointing in Bethany. And scholars have long pointed out that these Evangelists seem to order their content based on topical and thematic elements rather than trying to adhere to a strict chronology.¹⁰

Moreover, Matthew, Mark, and John have more similarities than dissimilarities. All three say this event took place in Bethany during the week of Passover. John and Mark not only say the ointment was "costly," but it was, specifically, "spikenard," and it was valued at "three hundred denarii." Matthew relays that the disciples were "indignant" at Mary's actions, while John makes a point to explain that Judas was the actual spokesman for the group. Lastly, and most importantly, all three accounts have Jesus explaining that this was done for his burial.

In all likelihood, there were two anointings: one occurred early in Jesus' life in Galilee, and the other occurred later in Jesus' life in Bethany.¹¹ One could go so far as there were three. This theory dates back as far as Origen in the third century.¹² But, historically, this view is the minority position as it is unlikely that Jesus had nearly identical anointings days apart from one another. Therefore, assuming there were only two anointings, perhaps Mary's actions weren't of her own ingenuity. She may have been inspired by stories of some nameless woman who had honored Jesus in a particularly spectacular way and wanted to recreate that moment for herself.

⁹ Keener (2012), 2:861.

¹⁰ Carson (1991), p. 426, "It must be remembered...that the time indicators in Matthew/Mark are notoriously loose. These Evangelists often order their accounts topically, not chronologically.

¹¹ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 198; Morris (1995), p. 510; Köstenberger (2008), p. 358.

¹² Keener (2012), 2:860.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 31

Text: John 12:4-5

Judas comes on the scene once again. The last time he was mentioned was way back in 6:71 when Jesus revealed that there was a “devil” amongst the twelve disciples. And, as John's audience knows, this so-called "disciple" will soon play a pivotal role in Jesus' crucifixion (cf. 13:21-30; 18:1-5). As the one “which should betray [Jesus],” Judas was a devil indeed.

But John also lets us in on a little-known fact: Judas wasn't only a devil; he was also a thief. Rather than be a proper steward of the resources given to Jesus and the disciples (cf. Lu. 8:3), Judas would line his own pockets. And because he was driven by greed, Judas will openly condemn one of the most incredible demonstrations of worship: Mary's anointing of Jesus. A heart so full of itself will give little admiration to another.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: