

Matthew 26:6-13

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-26/matthew-266-13/>

When Jesus is in the home of Simon the leper, a woman anoints His head with expensive perfume. The disciples see this as a waste of money and resources. Jesus informs them that she has done a good thing and that it prepares His body for burial. This event is commonly referred to as “Jesus’s Anointing at Bethany.”

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:2-8.

Luke includes an event that is similar to the one found here that may or may not be a parallel passage in Luke 7:36-50.

The next thing Matthew includes in his narrative of the life of *Jesus* was about *a woman who poured a vial of very costly perfume on His head*. Matthew records that this took place *at the home of Simon the leper in the village of Bethany*.

This event is commonly known as “*Jesus’s anointing at Bethany*.”

We will later discuss who this *Simon the leper* might be and examine other interesting questions concerning the timing of this encounter at the end of the commentary for this passage. First, we will focus on the central features of this narrative which are:

- **Jesus Visits the Home of Simon the Leper**
- **The Woman and her Anointing of Jesus**
- **The Disciples’ Indignation**
- **Jesus Corrects His Disciples**
- **Jesus Commends the Woman**

This commentary will conclude by addressing the more technical matters such as:

- **Allusions to King David**
- **The Timing of Jesus’s anointing in Bethany**
- **The Identity of Simon the Leper**

Jesus Visits the Home of Simon the Leper

Following *His* teachings in the Temple (Matthew 22), *His* chastisement of the Pharisees (Matthew 23), and *His* Olivet Discourse about the end of the age and *His* return (Matthew 24-25) *Jesus* returned to the nearby village of *Bethany*.

Bethany was located about two miles from Jerusalem along the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives ([John 11:18](#)). (See Additional Resources for map). Mark reports that *Bethany* was

where *Jesus* and *His disciples* returned to spend each *night* throughout their visit to Jerusalem for the Passover ([Mark 11:19](#)).

Matthew narrates that while *He was in Bethany*, *Jesus* came to *the home of Simon the leper*. The scene Matthew describes in His narration seems to be taking place after a dinner. It was customary for people in ancient Judea, after they had eaten, to recline toward *the table* for the after-dinner conversation. And *Jesus* was reclining *at the table* when the *woman* came to Him.

As will be discussed in more detail later, Matthew's language introducing this portion of his gospel: *Now when Jesus was in Bethany...* has the hallmarks of recalling a scene that took place earlier in the narrative. In other words, this reads like a flashback to when *Jesus* first arrived in Bethany from Jericho on His way to Jerusalem (Mark 10:46, 11:1; John 12:1). *Jesus's* anointing *in Bethany* took place shortly before His triumphal entry (Matthew 21:1-10) and "six days before the Passover" (John 12:1).

The Woman and her Anointing of Jesus

As Jesus reclined at the table in the home of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him.

John identifies the *woman*, as Mary (John 12:3), the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who *Jesus* raised from the dead (John 11:1-46). Unless John (John 12:2-8) is writing about a separate incident from the one that Matthew and Mark (Mark 14:3-9) are describing, this *woman* **is** Mary. For reasons we will get to later, these three gospel writers are most likely describing the same event. But in our commentary of Matthew, we will use his language (*a woman*) to refer to *her*.

It seems this *woman* came to *Jesus* just after dinner, because *He* was reclining *at the table* when *she* did. It was very likely that *Jesus* was in the middle of a conversation with *Simon the leper* and his guests when *she* came to Him. *Her* intrusion may have interrupted the conversation. If so, *her* breach of etiquette may have annoyed *Simon's* guests, including *the disciples*, for bringing to a halt the important matters they were discussing. But as we will soon see, *her* intrusion did not upset *Jesus*.

As bold as *her* intrusion was, what *she* did next was highly unusual. It was also both appropriate and necessary. And it was an unforgettable act of faith.

Matthew records that when *she* approached *Jesus*, *she* brought with *her* an *alabaster vial of very costly perfume*.

Alabaster was a whiteish stone that came from Egypt. It was a preferred material to store ointments and oils in the ancient world because it would not absorb or leech its contents. It also preserved oil from becoming spoilt.

The *woman* used an *alabaster vial* to hold what Matthew described as *costly perfume*. According to Mark, the *costly perfume* in *her alabaster vial* was nard (Mark 14:3). John said it was "a pound [literally a liter, weighing 12 ounces] of very costly perfume of pure nard" (John 12:3).

Nard was a *costly* fragrance that was manufactured from the roots of an herb. In ancient Judea, nard was used for both medicinal purposes and as an aromatic. Nard was sometimes used as a fragrance at funerals to freshen the air and mask any unpleasant smells coming from the corpse. Nard is mentioned by name in only two other places in scripture. Both are in the Song of Solomon (Song of Solomon 1:12; 4:13-14). The first of these two instances seems to be a prophetic foreshadowing of this moment in *Jesus's* life:

“While the king was at his table,
My perfume gave forth its fragrance.”
(Song of Solomon 1:12)

A more literal translation for *perfume* (“*nérde*”) in this verse from Song of Solomon is “nard.”

Matthew only comments that the *perfume* was *costly*. “The disciples” in Mark’s gospel, and specifically “Judas” in John’s gospel estimate that the vial cost “300 denarii” (Mark 14:4; John 12:5).

In ancient Judea, a single denarius was worth a day’s wages for a typical worker. Factoring out Sabbaths and other holidays, 300 denarii would have been worth a year’s income before taxes. *Costly* indeed. Converting these figures into present USA standards (2022) standards, the perfume in this *vial* would have roughly been worth \$40,000.00 or just below a middle-class annual income.

The *costly perfume* in the *alabaster vial* may have represented this *woman's* life savings and possibly *her* financial security in *her* old age. If it did not represent these things, then *she* almost certainly had considerably more wealth than the vast majority of Jews in ancient Judea.

After *she came to Jesus with her costly perfume as He reclined at the table*, Mark says, that “she broke the vial” (Mark 14:3) and both Mark and Matthew records that *she poured it on His head*.

This action would likely have brought the entire room to a halt. Everyone present would have stopped what they were doing or discussing and watched in shock and amazement at what was taking place.

First, this act was highly unusual and an extremely bold intrusion into the after-dinner conversation. It would have been noteworthy for *a woman* to interrupt a conversation as *she* did, but it would have been unthinkable for a *woman* to empty *a vile* of oil *on a man's head* publicly and unannounced.

Second, it was invasive of *Jesus's* personal space. It was not romantic in any way, but it was intimate and messy. When *she poured the vial on His head*, the oil soaked *His* hair. It likely ran down *His* face and into *His* beard. It likely dripped onto *His* clothing.

How would *Jesus* respond to *her*? Would *He* rebuke *the woman* for being improper? Would *He* allow *her* to do this to *Him*? Would *He* welcome, encourage, or commend *her* actions? We can speculate what inner thoughts *the woman* might have had in contemplating this action. *She*

would have been aware that *she* might encounter rebuke and rejection for *her* actions, which were outside of customary accepted behavior. We can speculate that the intimate time *she* had spent listening to Jesus might have informed *her* decision, and led *her* to conclude that this was proper (Luke 10:39).

Third, this was an incredibly extravagant action. By breaking *the alabaster vial* and pouring the *costly perfume on Jesus's head*, *the woman* was eliminating the possibility to use or resell it in the future. This was 300 denarii that would never be able to be used again.

The Disciples' Indignation

Matthew reported that *the disciples were indignant when they saw her do this*. To be *indignant* means to become morally outraged. They did not see the value in what *she* was doing. They perceived *her* extravagant action as sinful and a thing to be condemned.

Completely aghast, *the disciples said: Why this waste?* To them this was an unanswerable question. To their mind, there was no conceivably acceptable reason for how *her* action could be considered beneficial and not an extreme *waste* of resources.

The disciples expressed the reason for their indignation as: *this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor*.

The disciples thought that if the *costly vial* were to be used in *Jesus's* ministry that there was a far better and plainly obvious way it should be used. And this use did not include *it* being poured *on Jesus's head*. Namely, *they* thought *it* should have been sold at full market price, and the proceeds used to fund their ministry to *the poor*, by giving them clothing, food, and other assistance. *They saw* a squandered ministry opportunity.

To the extent that this was their true motive, they were not evil for thinking this. Except for Judas (John 12:4-6). It does not seem *they* were selfishly desiring that *the money* from the sale be used for themselves. As far as appearances are concerned, it seems *the disciples* were actually thinking of practicalities, one of which concerned the *poor*. It might be that *they* were also considering financial support for *Jesus* and *His* ministry, as *they* did not yet understand that *Jesus* was about to die.

But at the same time, *the disciples* did not understand the value in what this *woman* was doing. *They* did not consider that *she* might have been right to act as *she did* or that what *she did* was *good*. *They* were quick to get angry and deal out judgment for how *she spent her* own property. Their zeal lacked mercy and understanding. And *they* reacted and became *indignant* before *they* considered how *Jesus* responded to *her* and *what she did* for *Him*.

Jesus would correct their opinion of *the woman* and *her good deed* shortly.

Interestingly, Mark (whose account tracks the closest to Matthew's) records that it was only "some" of *the disciples* who were indignant. Apparently, there were "some" who did not become angry by *the woman's* actions. Or perhaps some of *the disciples* were not present *when* this took

place. But Mark does not name which *disciples* were or were not upset. Mark said some of *the disciples* at first scoffed among themselves at the *waste* (Mark 14:4), and then began “scolding” *the woman* (Mark 14:5) for *her* extravagance.

John goes much further. He names Judas Iscariot as the one who chiefly complained about *her* extravagance. Moreover, John reveals that Judas’s motives were impure. He did not care about *the poor*, he wanted the money designated for *the poor* so he could steal it for himself.

“But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?’ Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.”
(John 12:4-6)

It could be that Judas led some of *the disciples* to voice their disapproval. John’s gospel reveals that Judas’s moral indignation was fake. John’s omission of *the other disciples* seems to indicate that either no one else was initially upset, or once *they* became upset, *they* did not have Judas’s selfish motives.

Jesus Corrects His Disciples

Jesus corrected *His disciples’* perspective about what *the woman* did to *Him*.

Matthew informs us how *Jesus* was *aware of* what *His disciples* were thinking and saying about how *this woman* wasted the *costly perfume*.

As *He* corrected their perspective, *He* began with asking *them* a question: *Why do you bother the woman?* The phrasing of *Jesus’s* question appears to make it rhetorical. It would then have no answer, just as their question of *the woman* had no answer. Neither Matthew, nor Mark, give any record of *the disciples’* response to this question. *Jesus’s* question gently, but firmly, suggests that there is no good reason for *them* to *bother her*. And *He* seems to be asking it as a way to reframe *His disciples’* perspective. (*Jesus* was a master at reframing perspectives). By posing this question, *Jesus* invited *His disciples* to reexamine their indignation.

Jesus then offers *His* perspective: *For she has done a good deed to Me*.

With this short statement, *Jesus* declared to *His disciples* that what *this woman* did was *not a waste* of valuable resources as *they* had seen it. *He* declared that it was altogether *good* that *she* did this. By affirming *the woman’s* action, *Jesus* demonstrated that *she* acted appropriately when *she* came to *Him*, intruded into *the table-talk*, and poured perfume on *His* head.

Jesus’s statement may have corrected *the disciples’* opinion of *the woman*, that what *she* did was *good*. But *they* likely still did not understand how it was *good*. So, *Jesus* explained to *them* the reason it was *good*.

He began *His* explanation by affirming the goodness of *the disciples’* expressed intentions.

The opening thought of *Jesus's* expression, *For you always have the poor with you*, was an allusion to Deuteronomy 15:11: "For the poor will never cease to be in the land."

This Deuteronomy verse goes onto say, "therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'" *Jesus's disciples* would have likely caught the reference and been able to complete its thought. By means of this allusion, *Jesus* affirmed the rightness of *His disciples'* concern for *the poor*. By using this part of the passage *Jesus* is also emphasizing not only the appropriateness of their desire to care for *the poor*, but also that there will be ample opportunities for *them* to exercise charity. However, there will soon be no opportunity remaining to exercise good deeds for *Jesus*.

The disciples had expressed indignation because *they* felt the *very costly perfume* should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Caring for *the poor* is good. Seeking to be prudent with the resources God has entrusted to maximum benefit is also good. *Jesus* repeatedly taught and even commanded *His disciples* to do both these things,

"Sell your possessions and give to charity..."
(Luke 12:33)

"He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much."
(Luke 16:10)

But giving to *the poor* and an efficient allocation of resources are not the greatest good. They are a means to serve God by serving others. But God is the greatest good. *Jesus* is the greatest good. Even in our ministry to God and service to others, we must continually strive to seek first *His* kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33). *Jesus* will soon depart. There will be ample and appropriate opportunities for charity. Now is the opportunity to do a good deed for *Jesus*.

In saying what *He* did to *His disciples* here, *Jesus* affirmed the general rightness of their values of stewardship and the caring for *the poor* even as *He* corrected their perspective. *He* offered them the opportunity to see that they missed a far greater good in their zeal for what is good.

Moreover, *Jesus* did this regardless of whether their intentions were pure. We are not told if *the disciples'* motives were wholly right. But even if their motives were mixed with impure intentions, *Jesus* only addresses what is good, and ignores the rest. *He* even did this to Judas, whose intentions were evil (John 14:4-8). This is consistent with other biblical passages, including *Jesus's* "Parable of the Two Sons" (Matthew 21:28-32), and the Apostle Paul's statement regarding competing teachers who had less than noble intentions (Philippians 1:16-18). *Jesus* is okay with good deeds that have impure motives. The actions bless others, so are encouraged. The motives will be dealt with later, at the judgment (Hebrews 4:12).

By speaking to the good in their hearts and not pointing out what may have been wicked, *Jesus* was wisely making it as easy as possible for *them* to change their perspective. *He* did not wish to distract *them* by unnecessarily provoking their flesh. In doing this, *Jesus* demonstrated the principles of "agape" love, which is the highest form of biblical love, the love of choice, based

on values: “Love is patient” (1 Corinthians 13:4); “[Love] does not take into account a wrong suffered” (1 Corinthians 13:5); “[Love] bears all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7); “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). Translating these principles into the realm of moral instruction: “Love is winsome.” Agape love seeks the best for others, even in the face of difficulty or rejection.

There is a quick but helpful lesson to be learned for all of Christ’s followers as we try to instruct and help others grow in their faith. It is to not nitpick the errors of others—especially when they are not material to the primary lesson you are trying to teach them. It is often more beneficial to encourage what they are doing right, than it is to discourage what they may have done wrong.

Jesus explained to His disciples, “For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me”.

This parallelism expressed a couple of thoughts at once.

First, it communicated that caring for the poor is good, but loving *Jesus* is the highest priority. It is out of loving *Jesus* from which the greatest good to others will flow.

This may be similar to what *Jesus* told Martha when she became so distracted with all her preparations that she did not take the time to listen to *Jesus*, as her sister Mary did, when *He* visited their home:

“But the Lord answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:39-40).

There is a place for second things. But they must always come after listening to *Jesus*. That is the first thing. It is from listening to *Jesus* that we learn how best to serve others. It is from listening to *Jesus* that we gain the greatest benefit from life for ourselves as well as for others. *Jesus* states this overtly in *His* corrective chastisement to the church of Laodicea. After telling them *He* chastises those *He* loves, *Jesus* exhorts the Laodiceans to seek true treasure that lasts rather than seeking to gain earthly treasures that pass away. *He* tells them that the means to do this is to listen to *His* voice, and spend time with *Him*:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”
(Revelation 3:20)

Perhaps when *Jesus* stated this, *He* remembered *His* time with Mary, *the woman* of this story, when she sat with *Him*, sopping up *His* teachings, just prior to an anticipated meal (John 10:39).

Even in our ministries, where we are called to care for *the poor* and to wisely invest the resources God has entrusted to us, there are times for extravagant acts of love and worship. “There is an appointed time for everything”, wrote King Solomon (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Even in our own lives, extravagant expenditures are often deemed appropriate and *good* for celebrations such

as weddings, or commemorations of beloved family members at their funerals. (And as we shall soon see, *the woman's* action functioned somewhat like a funeral for *Jesus*).

It is not a *waste* to spend extravagantly when the moment calls for extravagance. Each decision we make of how to invest resources is a matter of stewardship. This was an occasion that called for extravagance. *The woman* recognized it by faith even when few, if anyone else, did. *She* acted according to the extravagance of the moment before it was over. And *Jesus* celebrated *this woman* for *her* generous act of faith.

The second thought the parallelism expressed was an allusion to *Jesus's* imminent departure.

His time with *His disciples* was short. *He* would be executed within a few days. And even after *He* rose *Jesus* would only remain with *His disciples* intermittently over the following forty days. After that *Jesus* would no longer be with *them* physically. *They* would no longer have *His* physical presence to interact with, take comfort in, or enjoy. *The disciples* would still be charged with proclaiming the gospel and caring for *the poor*, but *Jesus* would *not* be physically with *them* as they did so. This was an aching reminder that things would soon be quite different. Through remarks like these, *Jesus* was preparing *His disciples* for the great commission *He* was to entrust to *them*, to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 20:18-20).

After *Jesus* declared that what *the woman* did was good when *she* poured the alabaster vial of very costly perfume on *His* head, and after *He* acknowledged the virtue of *the disciples's* concern for *the poor*, and alluded to *His* death, *He* continued to explain to *His disciples* why the thing *she* did was good—and not wasteful. Having said all that *He* just shared, *Jesus* was now more direct about why *her* act was good.

For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial.

Jesus explained that *her* anointing of *Him* with costly perfume functioned as preparing *His* body for burial. This was likely a strange-sounding thing to their ears, because a *body* is not prepared for burial until after death. *Jesus* was clearly living as *He* said these words.

Had *she* anointed *His* dead body with the same very costly perfume after *He* was crucified, it is unlikely that *the disciples* would have complained about *her* wasting it. They would have understood that what *she* was doing was expressing *her* love for *Jesus*. *She* was doing what *she* could to care for *His* body with dignity and respect. This is similar to how *Jesus* describes *the woman* in Mark: “She has done what she could” (Mark 12:8).

While the Greek text is not clear that *the woman* had specifically *burial* preparation in mind when *she* did this, nonetheless, it was clearly a remarkable act of love. And *Jesus* knows that *He* is to die soon. *He*, if no one else, is able to appreciate the situational irony. *He* interprets *her* incredible act of love for everyone to hear as *burial* rites for *His* body. And as *she* prepared *His* body for burial, *He* is preparing *His disciples* for *His* approaching death.

Jesus Commends the Woman

Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.”

Jesus greatly praised *this woman* for her bold, generous, and loving act of faith. And in the process, He adjusted *the disciples’* perspective of *her* from one of indignation to one of admiration. *She* is a real heroine. *She* had boldness to love *Jesus* and did not let social norms or the scoffing of others (even the scoffing of fellow believers) hinder *her* from doing so. *She* was extravagant for *Jesus*, and it will be rewarded for all time.

When *Jesus* commended *this woman*, He speaks from *His* personal and divine authority. The phrase—*Truly I say to you*—was *Jesus’*s bold way of teaching with *His* own authority. Jewish Rabbis at the time would often begin their teachings with a phrase like, “As Rabbi so-and-so said...” This bolstered their teaching in the eyes of the people because it was grounded in a widely respected authority. *Jesus* did not teach this way. *He* taught and claimed to teach from *His* own authority: *Truly I say to you*.... This was because *He* was God: there was no higher authority than Himself to which *He* could appeal.

Appealing to *His* own divine authority, *Jesus* claimed that *wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her*.

The phrase, *this gospel*, refers to the central message of hope that *Jesus* proclaimed—that the kingdom of Heaven was near (Matthew 4:17). In other words, *wherever* the kingdom is proclaimed or *wherever Jesus* is referred to as the Messiah *she* and *her* act of anointing *will also be spoken in memory of her*.

The phrase, *whole world*, could refer to the entire earth. It also could refer to the entire created order of heaven and earth. The Greek word “kosmos,” which is translated here as *world*, can mean both the physical *world*, or the entire created order. Either way this is quite the memorial.

In speaking this, *Jesus* indirectly predicted that this account will be included in the gospel accounts, that the gospel accounts will be written, and that these gospel accounts will be spread unto the entire *world*.

In this she is an example of *Jesus’*s principle “the last shall be first” (Matthew 20:16).

It is worth noting that there is a biblically appropriate way to seek fame. Seeking the fame of the world is often self-destructive. We sometimes lose our own identity seeking to please others. Or perhaps we engage in self-destructive actions in order to gain attention. Believers are exhorted to seek a lasting remembrance by doing what is good. *Jesus* uses this *good deed of the woman* as an illustration of what each believer is encouraged to seek:

“[God] who **will render to each person according to his deeds**: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.” (Romans 2:6-7)

This verse from Romans indicates that any believer who does good deeds with a motivation of worshiping and following *Jesus* will gain “glory and honor” from *Jesus*, even as this *woman*

gained glory and honor. It may well be that although we know from other accounts that this *woman* is Mary, Matthew (under inspiration of the Holy Spirit) simply used *the woman* in order to indicate that this opportunity exists for any *woman*. Our *world* has a long and sad history of abuse and condescension toward women. But this passage makes clear that each *woman* has the opportunity to rise above her “social standing” (whatever it might be) and achieve a level of greatness that comes directly from *Jesus*.

Allusions to King David

Jesus's anointing in *Bethany* has multiple references and overtones from the life of King David.

First there is a clear allusion to Samuel's anointing David as King of Israel.

The story of David's anointing is told in 1 Samuel 16:1-13. When Samuel obeyed God and went to Jesse's house to anoint one of his sons to be the new king, God told Samuel that He had chosen none of the sons Samuel reviewed. Samuel then asked Jesse if he had any additional sons who were not present. Jesse told him that there was the youngest, but he was out tending sheep.

Samuel asked Jesse to call for David, and when he came, God told Samuel that David was the one he was to anoint. Then to the surprise and chagrin of his older brothers in his midst, David was anointed the future king of Israel by Samuel. Samuel knew he was anointing David as king over Israel, but it is likely that David's family did not understand that David was being anointed as king. If they had known, his jealous brothers might have used that knowledge against him (1 Samuel 17:28). In like manner, *Jesus* was being anointed for His death, but it appears that if any understood this, it was only *the woman*.

The allusion of David's anointing has a dual aspect to *Jesus*'s anointing in *Bethany*.

The first and most obvious aspect of this allusion is between David and *Jesus* as anointed ones. King David is often compared to King *Jesus*. As the Messiah, *Jesus* is a priest like Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4), a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), and a King like David (Isaiah 9:7). The word for “Messiah” in Hebrew is “Mahsheekh.” It literally means “anointed one.” In Greek, the word for anointed one is “Christos.” The English word for Christos is Christ. “*Jesus Christ*” literally means, “Jesus, the Messiah” or “Jesus, the Anointed One.”

Jesus was the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-17). The disciples already knew this by the time *Jesus* was in *Bethany*. Many Jews were already proclaiming *Him* as the Messiah (Matthew 20:30; 20:8-9). And for those who had faith to see beyond the unceremonious circumstances in *Simon's home*, this was *Jesus*'s earthly anointing. *Jesus* (like David) was unexpectedly and somewhat scandalously anointed.

Moreover, David and *Jesus* were also anointed twice with oil. David was first anointed by Samuel in his father's home (1 Samuel 1:16) and later at Hebron when he ascended as king of Judah (2 Samuel 5:1-5). At their first anointings, few could imagine the significant impact that either David or *Jesus* would have upon Israel. At David's second anointing, he was proclaimed king. At *Jesus*'s second anointing by Mary, He was being prepared for His burial, which would

lead to His resurrection, at which time He was granted authority over heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18).

Additionally, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit upon His baptism (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-10; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34). When the New Testament describes the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus “as/like a dove” (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32) it does so in feminine terms. Greek is a “gendered” language and the word for “dove” is the feminine noun “peristerah.” The femininity of form the Spirit descended upon *Jesus* at *His* first anointing, along with the fact that *the woman* anointed *Him* in Bethany could be another parallel between the *Jesus*’s two anointings. Woman was created as a helper (Genesis 2:28). The Hebrew word translated “helper” in Genesis 2:28 is used primarily in the Old Testament to describe God. Jesus called the Holy Spirit the “helper” (John 14:16). Jesus said that His purpose in coming to earth was to serve (Matthew 20:28). This demonstrates how husband and wife display the image of God, as it is written:

“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”
(Genesis 1:27)

It can also be viewed that David’s two anointings presage Christ’s two Advents. Before he became King, David was “rejected” by Saul and had to spend his days on the run hiding in caves—in exile as it were. After David’s second anointing, his reign as king began. When *Jesus* returns to earth after *He* was initially rejected, *He* too will be recognized and coronated as King (Philippians 2:9-11; Revelation 19:11-16).

This is the first aspect of the allusion.

But in this allusion, David is also like *the woman* in some respects. This is the second aspect of the allusion.

One way David and the woman are alike is that both David and the woman were the underestimated, and unassuming, and overlooked figures in their respective moments. And both were elevated as being great (Matthew 20:16).

In *the home* of Jesse, David was initially overlooked to be anointed as king. No one but God and the prophet Samuel seemed to have thought him worthy of anointing. It came as an irritating surprise to his brothers in his midst when Samuel poured the anointing oil on young David’s *head*. But it was the right and *good* thing to do. At that point in time, it is likely that no one but Samuel understood that David was being chosen as king. Upon David’s first anointing, the Holy Spirit came upon Him, as occurred also when Jesus was baptized (1 Samuel 16:13). Similarly, it seems that few if any understood that the *woman* was anointing Jesus for His death.

In *the home* of *Simon the Leper*, *this woman* was initially overlooked and *her* actions misunderstood. As *a woman* in this era, *she* may not have even been allowed a seat at the table where the men reclined. And as *a woman*, *she* certainly would not have been endowed with priestly authority by the Jews. *She* would have been the last person in Israel who would have

been expected to have the high honor of anointing the Messiah, just as David was the last person anyone expected to become Israel's greatest king.

Another similarity between *the woman* and David was their extravagant worship. *The woman's* extravagant act of worship by *Jesus's* anointing in *Bethany* is reminiscent to King David's undignified dancing before the Lord.

The story of David dancing before the Ark is told in 2 Samuel 6:14-22. When the ark was brought back to Jerusalem, King David, dressed in priestly garments danced with all his might. Some, including his wife, felt that he did so in an undignified manner. When she scolded him for making a fool of himself in front of everyone, David told her, "It was before the LORD" that he had danced and that he would gladly become "more lightly esteemed than this and will be humble in my own eyes" (2 Samuel 6:21-22).

Like King David, who had no concern for his "dignity" or "social standing" or the opinions of others as he worshiped the LORD, so too did *this woman* have no concern for *her* dignity or the opinions of others as *she* worshiped *Jesus*. Both *did good* in the eyes of God.

A third similarity between *the woman* who anointed *Jesus in Bethany* and King David is that they both serve *Jesus*.

Paradoxically, David is both the ancestor as well as a subject of the High King, *Jesus*. *Jesus* is David's descendant who will rule forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16, Matthew 1:1-17). And as the Messiah, *Jesus* is greater than King David. *Jesus* pointed this paradox out when *He* challenged the Pharisees in the temple (Matthew 22:41-45). And as *the woman in Bethany* served *Jesus* (who is God) through her incredible faith, so did David serve and follow after God's (who is *Jesus*) heart (Acts 13:22).

With these allusions and overtones from the life of King David, Matthew further links *Jesus* the Messiah to King David in the minds of his Jewish readers.

The Timing of *Jesus's* Anointing in Bethany

When did the anointing of *Jesus* at Bethany take place?

All four gospels describe an event strikingly similar, if not identical, to the one described here in Matthew: But each version includes unique details that either fill in the gaps or distinguish their account as a separate event in *Jesus's* life.

- Mark 14:3-9
- John 12:2-8
- Luke 7:36-50

This section of the commentary will attempt to sort these details to help the reader better understand what the Bible says.

To begin, it seems that Matthew, Mark, and John are all describing the same incident. There are enough differences between these three and the account in Luke that make it seem more likely that it was a different occasion in *Jesus's* life than the one described by Matthew, Mark, and John.

The notable differences in Luke are:

- It seems to have taken place much earlier in *Jesus's* ministry than the final week before the crucifixion. The event Luke describes takes place in Chapter 7 of his gospel and his narration of the final week begins in Luke 19.
- The woman in Luke is specifically described as “a sinner” (Luke 7:39), and loosely seems to indicate that the woman in his account was Mary Magdalene. John says that *the woman* at the anointing in *Bethany* was Mary, the sister of Lazarus (John 12:3).
- It took place in the home of “Simon” who was “a Pharisee” (Luke 7:36, 40), as opposed to *Simon, the leper*.
- *Jesus* challenges the Pharisees’ sense of self-righteousness by telling the “Parable of the Debtors” (Luke 7:41-43). (None of these elements seem to be present and/or the focus of the similar narratives in Matthew, Mark, and John). Additionally, Luke makes no mention of cost, the disciples’ indignation, or of *Jesus's* comment about the poor and His burial which are featured prominently in Matthew, Mark, and John. In other words, the main point that is drawn from Luke is materially different from the point drawn in Matthew, Mark, and John.

For these reasons it seems apparent that what Luke described in the middle of his gospel was separate from the moment which Matthew, Mark, and John describe towards the end of theirs.

All three of Matthew, Mark, and John agree that:

- this event took place in *Bethany*
- it happened within a week of *Jesus's* final Passover
- as *Jesus* was *reclining at a table*
- *a woman came* and unexpectedly *poured very costly perfume on Jesus*
- one or more of *the disciples* expressed that *the perfume* should have been *sold for the poor*
- *Jesus* corrected *His disciples' perspective* by saying *they always have the poor, but they won't always have Him*
- *Jesus* explained *the woman's good deed* in terms of *His burial*

The details described throughout Mark’s version make it the connecting account between John’s and Matthew’s.

Mark’s and Matthew’s narratives of this event are a near perfect mirror of one another. Additionally, both gospels:

- affirm that this event took place *in the home of Simon the leper*
- say that *the woman poured the perfume on Jesus's head*

- mention this event in their narrative after they mentioned Jesus's triumphal entry and episodes confronting the religious authorities in the temple.

Mark's and John's gospels share these two significant details:

- identify "pure nard" as the *very costly perfume*
- say *the disciples* estimate the *perfume's* worth to be "300 hundred denarii"

John's gospel includes these specific details not mentioned by Matthew or Mark:

- The anointing at Bethany took place "six days before the Passover" and when *Jesus* first arrived from Jericho en route to Jerusalem (John 12:1). John says the anointing took place *before Jesus's* triumphal entry.
- Lazarus, whom *Jesus* raised from the dead, was at *the table* with *Jesus* when this happened (John 12:2).
- Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, were serving in attendance (John 12:2).
- John names Mary as *the woman* who anointed *Jesus* (John 12:3)
- John says that Mary wiped Jesus's feet with her hair (John 12:3).
- John names Judas was the main disciple who became *indignant* by Mary's extravagance (John 12:4)
- John identifies Judas's motive as wanting to pilfer the money for himself (John 12:6).

John adds new information to the same event that is not found in either Matthew or Mark's accounts. Any minor discrepancies between John's account and Matthew's and Mark's are easily reconciled.

First, it is likely that Mary initially poured the perfume on Jesus's head and that some of it fell onto His feet, which she wiped with her hair.

Second, as to the timing of this event and to whether it took place before or after *Jesus's* triumphal entry, only John is specific. It took place "six days before Passover." Matthew and Mark thematically place this event between the chief priests' plotting of *Jesus's* murder (Matthew 26:3-5; Mark 14:1-2) and Judas's betrayal (Matthew 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11). Incidentally, their placement of Judas's betrayal immediately following this episode may have been their way to suggest that Judas was the disciple most *indignant* about *the costly waste*.

Matthew and Mark both introduce their respective accounts of *Jesus's* anointing in *Bethany* with language that could be used to recall an event that took place earlier in their narrative. Matthew begins with the phrase: *Now when Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper*. Mark begins his narrative with the phrase: "While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper." Both introductions are literary methods of introducing a flashback.

All of this evidence strongly indicates that Matthew, Mark, and John are retelling slightly different versions of the same event and not describing separate anointings of *Jesus*.

The Identity of Simon the Leper

Simon the Leper is only mentioned by this name here in Matthew's and Mark's accounts. But interestingly, in the similar but likely separate event described in Luke's gospel (Luke 7:36-50), the woman who approaches Jesus and washes his feet with her tears takes place in the home of "Simon" who is described as a "Pharisee." But even though these two hosts share the same name, there are two compelling reasons to believe that they are not the same individual.

1. *Simon* was a common name in Jesus's day. For instance, there were two men named Simon among the Twelve apostles (Matthew 10:2, 4). The fact that these Simons were given descriptors to their name—"the Pharisee" and "*the leper*"—further distinguishes them from each other and other men named *Simon*.
2. The differences between the sinful *woman's* washing of *Jesus's* feet described in Luke 7:36-50 and *Jesus's* anointing in *Bethany* described in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:2-8 that we've outlined above strongly suggest that these are two different moments, despite any common features.

Apparently, *Simon the leper* had suffered and seems to have fully recovered from the disease of leprosy. If *Simon* was not healed, he would not be able to receive guests, as lepers lived segregated from others, to protect them from infection. Because there were no known cures for leprosy at that time, it stands to reason that *Jesus* had healed him of this dreadful disease. Matthew recorded *Jesus* healing a *leper* shortly after the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 8:1-4). Luke recorded *Jesus* healing ten lepers, but only the Samaritan of the group came back to thank *Him* (Luke 17:12-19). *Jesus* also healed numerous other people of various diseases, which likely included many people with leprosy.

Perhaps *Simon* was one of these lepers *Jesus* had healed, and he had invited his Healer into his home as a show of gratitude when *Jesus was in Bethany*. *Simon* seems to have known Lazarus. Lazarus was seated next to *Jesus* when the anointing in *Bethany* happened at *Simon's home* (John 12:2). Because *Bethany* was a small village, *Simon* probably knew *Lazarus* even before *Jesus* famously raised him from the dead (John 12:9-11).

There is another possibility of who *Simon the leper* was—*Jesus's* friend, Lazarus. It could have been that the man *Jesus* raised from the dead in *Bethany* went by two names: *Simon the leper*, and "Lazarus" among his close friends and family. Lazarus's name is mentioned only in John's gospel, where Lazarus's resurrection featured prominently (John 11:1-46) but also the news of this miracle, which reached the ears of Caiaphas the high priest (John 11:47-53).

Lazarus's resurrection was so remarkable that large crowds came to "see Lazarus, whom [Jesus] raised from the dead" and that because of this, the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in *Jesus* (John 12:9-11).

The other gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke make no overt mention of this miracle. They never refer to Lazarus as "Lazarus." However, it is possible that they might be referring to this man made famous by being raised from the dead by his more formal name of *Simon* and then use the descriptor, *the leper*, because he died of leprosy. John does not say what disease killed

Lazarus—but it could have been leprosy. When Jesus said to remove the stone which sealed his grave, Lazarus’s sister Martha warned that “there will be a stench for he has been dead for four days” (John 11:39). This could indicate that they did not use spices to perfume his body because of the threat of infection, or that the disease of leprosy which decays the body before death produces an odor that quickly overpowers these burial perfumes.

All that to say this: the name *Simon the leper* may have been Matthew and Mark’s way of referring to Lazarus, and their Jewish audiences would have known exactly who *Simon the leper* was without any additional commentary was because of the fame of this miracle.

As fascinating as this possibility may be, there is of course no way for us to know for certain if *Simon the leper* and Jesus’s friend, Lazarus, were the same man.

Biblical Text

26:6-13 Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, 7 a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined at the table. 8 But the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and said, “Why this waste? 9 For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor.” 10 But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. 11 For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me. 12 For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. 13 Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.”