

The Sound of Shattered Extravagance

Key Verse: Mark 14:3 – “And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on his head.”

There is a sound that haunts the room in Bethany. It is not the clink of cups nor the murmur of honored guests around a table. It is the sharp, irrevocable crack of alabaster hitting stone floor. That sound is the gospel in one syllable: expensive love breaking something valuable because it has found something more valuable still. For seasoned believers who have heard a thousand sermons on grace, on faith, on the blood of the Lamb, this story remains dangerously fresh. It offends our careful stewardship. It scandalizes our measured devotion. We have built whole theologies of prudent giving, of balanced worship, of emotional restraint. And then a woman whom the text does not even name walks into a room full of men who think they understand propriety, and she shatters a year's wages against the head of Jesus. The question is not whether you admire her. ***The question is whether you have ever heard that crack in your own soul.***

The first component of this profound act is the breaking of the vessel itself. The alabaster box was not merely a container. Alabaster, a soft stone often carved into a sealed flask, held its perfume captive until the long neck was snapped. ***Unlike a cork or a lid, the alabaster box could not be opened gradually, used sparingly, or rationed for future occasions.*** The woman understood what the disciples missed: that true worship cannot be portioned out. You cannot give God a little bit of your reputation, a slice of your time, a fraction of your fortune, and call it extravagant. Extravagance breaks the thing that holds it back. Consider the Old Testament pattern. When Abraham took Isaac to Mount Moriah, he did not offer a ram from the flock in advance. He broke the vessel of his only son, laying that promised future on the altar, trusting that God would raise him from the dead in a figure. Genesis 22:10 says, “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.” That knife was the breaking of the alabaster box of Abraham's fatherhood. When David danced before the Lord with all his might, stripped of his royal dignity, his wife Michal despised him in her heart. Second Samuel 6:14 records, “And David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod.” He broke the alabaster box of kingly decorum. The vessel of self-conscious dignity shattered on the floor of Jerusalem. And when the apostle Paul counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of

Christ Jesus our Lord, he wrote in Philippians 3:8, “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.” That word dung is the sound of the world’s finest accomplishments hitting the pavement. Every true act of extravagant love breaks something that the world calls valuable. ***The question for the seasoned church-goer is this: what unbroken alabaster box are you still carrying?*** Is it your reputation among the elders? Your carefully managed savings that never sees a reckless gift? Your emotional composure that has never wept openly in worship? Your theology that has never been stretched beyond its comfortable boundaries? The breaking is not optional. You cannot pour out the perfume while keeping the bottle intact. The bottle is the very thing that says, “I will give this much, but no more.”

The second component is the specific nature of what was broken: an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard, very precious. Mark tells us it was worth more than three hundred pence, a laborer’s full year of wages. Spikenard came from the Himalayas, transported across trade routes, a luxury beyond the dreams of most villagers. This woman had not found it in a field. She had saved for it. She had perhaps inherited it as a dowry or a burial spice for her own body. And in one motion, she poured the entire thing onto Jesus’ head. The disciples, led by Judas Iscariot according to John’s gospel, complained indignantly, “Why was this waste of the ointment made?” That word waste is the crucial accusation. They said she wasted it. She could have sold it and given to the poor. The logic sounds holy. But Jesus defended her with words that should make every prudent planner tremble: ***“Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on me.*** For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.” Mark 14:6-8. The deep analysis here is that the disciples were not actually concerned for the poor. They were concerned with control. They wanted devotion to be measurable, transferable, and efficient. But extravagant love is never efficient. It is never the optimal use of resources. ***When Mary of Bethany (for most scholars identify this woman as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus) poured that spikenard, she was not investing; she was anointing a corpse. Jesus says she did it for his burial. No one else at the table understood that in three days, the body of Jesus would be broken like that alabaster box.*** His own flesh would be the vessel of divinity, and it would be shattered on the cross. The soldiers would not break his legs, but they broke his skin, his back, his hands and feet. John 19:36 says, “For these things were done, that the

scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken.” The bones remained whole, but the alabaster box of his body was opened by the spear and the nails. The spikenard of his blood and water poured out for the sin of the world. This woman’s breaking of the box was a prophetic act, a living parable of what Jesus was about to do. And here is the deep point for the seasoned believer: you cannot receive that broken body of Christ without becoming a broken vessel yourself. The communion table is not a ceremony of mild remembrance. It is a covenant of mutual shattering. “Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you,” says First Corinthians 11:24. The word broken is not a metaphor. And the response of faith is not to stand unbroken before that table. ***It is to bring your own alabaster box—your pride, your security, your future—and break it at his feet.*** The poor you will always have. That is not an excuse for neglect, but a recognition that there will always be another worthy cause, another urgent need, another ministry that could use those three hundred pence. But Jesus, in his physical presence at that table, was only there for a moment. Extravagant love seizes the moment. It does not wait for a more convenient season. It does not calculate the resale value of worship.

The third component is the fragrance that fills the room after the breaking. Mark 14:3 simply says she poured it on his head. John’s gospel adds that the house was filled with the odor of the ointment. John 12:3: “Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.” The fragrance could not be contained. It went into the stone walls, the wooden beams, the clothes of every guest. It lingered for hours. And here is a profound truth that seasoned saints often miss: the breaking creates a fragrance that serves the whole room. ***The disciples who complained were nevertheless surrounded by that perfume. Even Judas, whose heart was already bargaining for thirty pieces of silver, breathed in the same air. Extravagant love blesses people who do not understand it and do not deserve it.*** Think of the Old Testament example of the burnt offering. Leviticus 1:9 says, “And the priest shall burn all on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD.” The sacrifice was consumed entirely. Nothing was held back. The smoke ascended, a fragrance pleasing to God. But that smoke also drifted over the camp, touching the tents of the grumbling and the faithful alike. When David built an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah, he refused to offer a sacrifice that cost him nothing. Second Samuel 24:24: “And the king said unto Araunah, Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing.” The price

was the breaking. The fragrance was the testimony. In the New Testament, Paul picks up this image in Second Corinthians 2:15: “For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish.” Your broken alabaster box becomes a fragrance that leads some to salvation and others to hardening, but it cannot be hidden. ***The modern church has mastered the art of unscented Christianity. We give without sacrifice, serve without cost, worship without tears, and love without the crack of alabaster on the floor.*** We have learned to open the bottle carefully, dab a little perfume on our wrists, and seal it back for later. But that is not the woman of Bethany. She did not dab. She shattered. And the room was never the same.

Consider one more biblical example that ties these components together: the widow of Zarephath in First Kings 17. Elijah found her gathering sticks at the gate, preparing her last meal. She had a handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruse. She was about to make a small cake for herself and her son, and then die. Elijah said to her, “Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son.” First Kings 17:13. That is an alabaster box moment. She had to break the vessel of her last resources, pour out her future on the prophet’s request, and trust that God would multiply the brokenness. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail. The breaking became the source of miraculous supply. In the same way, when Mary broke her alabaster box, she did not become poorer. Jesus said, ***“Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.” Mark 14:9. Her name is still fragrant two thousand years later.*** The disciples who held back their three hundred pence are remembered only for their complaining and, in Judas’s case, for his betrayal. The economy of the kingdom is inverted. The broken things are the lasting things. The poured-out lives are the remembered lives. The vessels that remain intact, carefully preserved on the shelf of respectable religion, collect dust. They never fill a house with perfume.

So then, seasoned church-goer, what is your alabaster box? You have heard the gospel for years. You have sat under sound preaching. You can quote Romans 8:28 and Jeremiah 29:11. You know the doctrines of grace and the five solas. But have you broken anything lately? Have you given until it hurt, not just until it was convenient? Have you forgiven someone when every ounce of justice demanded you hold the grudge? Have you confessed a sin to a brother or sister when you could have kept it secret and maintained your reputation? Have you wept openly in a prayer meeting, not caring who saw your tears? Have you risked

something for the kingdom that you cannot get back? The woman in Bethany did not ask for permission. She did not take a vote. She did not wait for the worship committee to approve the budget. She walked into that room because she had been forgiven much. She had watched her brother Lazarus come out of the tomb four days dead, breathing again because Jesus said, "Lazarus, come forth." John 11:43. How could she not break a year's wages at his feet? ***What is three hundred pence compared to a resurrected brother?*** Your own resurrection is coming. ***The question is whether you will wait until heaven to pour out your worship, or whether you will begin now, on this side of the grave, with the sound of shattering alabaster ringing in the ears of a watching world.*** Let them call it waste. Jesus calls it a good work. And his is the only voice that matters when the perfume has settled and the room grows quiet, and only the fragrance of broken, extravagant love remains.