

The Fragrance of Love

Hello, & thanks for listening to *Voice of the Church*. I'm Pastor Ryan Swale. And in recent weeks, I've done some meditations on the Song of Songs, which is a song right in the middle of our Bibles that the church has rightly understood the Song as the "soundtrack of redemption," singing heaven's song of Christ who comes to receive a bride for himself.

That's how the church has historically understood the Song of Songs. And one of the interesting supports for that interpretation is the way the NT alludes to the Song of Songs with reference to Christ... One of those places is at the anointing of Christ by Mary of Bethany in Matthew 26, which I'll now read.

It says: "Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

I had the privilege of preaching this passage about a year ago for our daughter's baptism. I was preaching through Matthew's gospel, & had just come out of some of these passage like Matt. 22 & 25 where Christ tells these parables of a wedding feast & the 10 virgin bridesmaids, both of which identify him as the "bridegroom." The same thing he calls himself in Matt. 9 when he says "the wedding guests cannot mourn while the 'bridegroom' is with them." And, so, Matthew has been hinting at this bridegroom theme throughout his gospel, & especially in the chapters leading up to his death. And in Ch. 26 we find this passage that has some striking parallels with Song of Songs Ch. 1, where the bride-to-be says, "While the king was at his table, my nard gave forth its fragrance..." Interestingly, *John* (in John 12) identifies Mary's ointment as nard, & says its *fragrance* filled the house. It seems to be a direct allusion to Song of Songs, confirming that Christ is indeed the bridegroom of that Song.

And, as I preached this at the baptism of our daughter, I made the point that Mary's actions signal what the church & every believer ought to do in response to this bridegroom. The church father Bede said of Matt. 26, "Here is accomplished what the bride *glories* of in the Song of Songs... Showing that what Mary did as a *type*, the whole church, & *every perfect soul* should always do." He's saying Mary's actions *signal* that the royal bridegroom has come, & give us a *pattern* for how we, as the church, & we, as individual members of Christ's bride, should love him... We see in this passage the bride's love for Christ, & Christ's love for the bride.

And we're not saying Mary is "married" to Christ. But the allusion in v. 7 to Song of Songs *signals* that Christ is the bridegroom. Matthew has been making that point in Ch. 9, & 22, & 25, and Mary gets it. She recognizes that Christ is the bridegroom of the Song and acts accordingly.

Her love for him is *unprompted*... Christ is in Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper (likely a *former-leper* who Christ healed). John 12 says *Lazarus* is there. So, it's a feast of gratitude held by recipients of Christ's grace – the whole *thing* is unprompted... But then in v. 7: "A woman (who we know from the other gospels is Mary) comes with an alabaster flask of *very expensive* ointment & pours it on his head. This is *un-prompted*; it's not necessary for her to do this. But, out of gratitude, she voluntarily performs this act of devotion to Christ.

And, even as it's unprompted; it's also *unrestrained*. John says it was a whole *pound* of perfume. *Mark*, that she actually *breaks* it as she pours it over him! She holds nothing back. She doesn't just dip a little bit, or carefully ration a small amount, but gives it all. It is unprompted, unrestrained; & *unbelievably* costly...

Notice the word "expensive" in v. 7. In fact, "*very expensive*..." "Having an alabaster flask of *very expensive* ointment, she poured it on his head." And the disciples are *mad* because they *know* what could've been done with it! The other Gospels tell us it cost a year's wages! It was a *full pound* of pure nard. That means extracted from the nard plant in the Himalayas in Northern India, so, this perfume had to be imported... Spikenard was considered the *foremost* of perfumes. *It is the best of the best*, & she pours it out on Christ. This oil from a far country she pours on her Savior! She breaks it & holds nothing back! Can you *imagine* a whole year's wages spent on just showing someone your love for them? John Stott calls this a gesture of lavish, almost *reckless* devotion... Christ calls it beautiful. "She's done a **beautiful** thing." Unprompted, unrestrained, & unbelievably costly.

Just as Christ told *Martha* in Luke 10, “Mary has chosen the better thing that’ll not be taken from her,” he says the same here. It’s almost a *re-telling* of the Mary & Martha story. You remember how Martha criticized her, asking Jesus to tell her to *serve!* But he says, “By sitting at my feet to hear my Word, she’s chosen the better thing.” And here the disciples have a similar accusation, “Why is she wasting her resources in such lavish devotion to Christ when there’s poor to be fed?” But Christ says, “She’s done a beautiful work. She’s chosen the better thing. The poor will always be with you; but you will not always have me!” She’s chosen the better thing... We’re warned by Mary’s example not to ignore the value of a life spent in meditation on God. A life spent *adoring* Christ...

That’s why she holds nothing back... That’s why this unprompted act of devotion; why this *costly* act of devotion. Because ever since Luke 10, she’s been sitting at Christ’s feet, soaking him in! So, holds nothing back, having beheld the king in his beauty! Having looked into the eyes of Christ & come to know him; & says with the bride in the Song, ‘Behold, you are handsome, my love!’

We see in this act of devotion Mary’s *affection for Christ*, her *gratitude* to Christ, & her *submission* to Christ as king – that’s what Song of Songs said, it was the “King” at his table who would be anointed... By her unprompted, unrestrained, & unbelievably costly act of devotion, she shows her love for the king... And the disciples don’t understand it because “they don’t understand,” as one writer said, that “the native language of love is lavishness.” And, so, they criticize her...

And this same temptation remains for all of us. To measure devotion to Christ simply by getting things done! As if time spent in prayer, & meditation, & grateful reflection is *wasted*... To think this sort of devotion is reckless... But Christ says it’s the better thing.

She’s rightly estimated the value of the bride-groom, unlike Judas whose criticism shows he places too *low* a value on Christ. Which is why he sells him for 30 pieces of silver... Mary says a year’s wages is worth one moment of worship; Judas says *3 months wages* is worth his life...! The difference between a genuine bride & a gold-digger...

We see in this passage the bride’s love for Christ... But notice also *Christ’s love for the bride*... As this passage is sandwiched between the announcement of Christ’s *looming-death* & the chief priest’s plot to *kill* him in verses 1-5 & Judas’ act of *treason* in 14-16... On both sides of the bride’s love for Christ is Christ’s for the bride. Which is why he says in v. 12 that Mary’s anointing prepares him for burial. He goes to the Cross *willingly*.

Just as Mary's love was unprompted, unrestrained, & unbelievably costly, we see the same with Christ. His love for us is unprompted & voluntary; there's nothing *in us* that deserves it! It's unrestrained – just as Mary holds nothing back, neither does Christ, even unto *death...!* And just as her love is unbelievably costly, so we confess in the Canons of Dort Christ's death is of “*infinite worth!*” Christ is worth more than 10,000 worlds! In fact, Mary had only begun to scratch the *surface* of his value!

The Passover sacrifice he's bringing to Jerusalem for the sake of his bride is the most *valuable* sacrifice ever made. “With *his* own blood he bought her, & for her life he died.” This is the royal bridegroom of Song of Songs 1, the King who's now become the priest, come to lay down his life for his bride.

He leaves heaven to seek her out in fulfillment of God's plan from eternity, giving himself for her that he might cleanse her!” That he might say to her as the king says to his bride in Song of Songs 1, “Behold, you are beautiful, my love! Behold, you are beautiful!” And do we not see that love Christ has for his bride in v. 10 where Christ *defends* her against the disciples' false accusations. “Why do you trouble the woman?” & *cherishes* her, saying, “She's done a beautiful thing!” That'll be proclaimed throughout all the earth. Even as the smell of nard filled the house, it'll fill the earth, becoming a sweet aroma unto heaven! This is how Christ receives our heartfelt, costly, un-restrained worship: with joy!

And as I preached this on the occasion of our daughter's baptism, I made the point that this is our prayer for her: that God would fill her with a desire to worship the bridegroom in such a way that her praises ascend like a sweet aroma to heaven! That she would be given eyes to gaze on the king in his beauty, & ears to listen to him as Mary does. And respond in devotion. That's my prayer for our *daughter*, & that's my prayer for you who are listening. That you would behold the love of Christ, the bridegroom from heaven, & respond in unprompted, unrestrained, & un-believable costly love, for that is how he has loved us. Thank you for listening; and may God bless you.