

PERFUME VERY PRECIOUS.

JOHN 12:1-11. – APRIL 16.

Golden Text: – "She hath done what she could." – Mark 14:8.

IT WAS Saturday night, as we reckon it, the evening following the Jewish Sabbath day – after six P.M. – that Jesus and his disciples and Lazarus, whom he had previously awakened from the sleep of death, with some other friends of the family, sat down to a feast prepared in special honor of Jesus at the home of his friends, where he was always welcome and where he stopped more frequently than at any other house during the period of his ministry, so far as the records show. It was at Bethany, the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. It was called the house of Simon the leper, one supposition being that Simon was the father of the family, and another that he was the husband of Martha, who at this time was a widow.

Our Lord and his disciples were en route for Jerusalem, and Bethany was on the way, in the suburbs. They probably arrived on what would correspond to our Friday, or the Jewish sixth day of the week. Expecting them, Martha and Mary had provided quite a sumptuous feast, and, in harmony with the Jewish rules governing in such cases, the dishes were evidently prepared in advance, as Sabbath labor was prohibited. No account is given us of that Sabbath day at Bethany, but we can well imagine the delightful social intercourse between the dear members of that family and the Lord and his chosen apostles.

JESUS IN SOCIAL LIFE.

The Master's words of wisdom and love are not recorded, but we know on the best of authority that a good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth good things, and out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. Hence we may know that

the day was not given over to frivolity of word or conduct, but to rest, spiritual enjoyment, which minister to the refreshment of all in the right attitude of heart. The same rule applies to all of the Lord's followers wherever they may be, whatever may be their vocation or surroundings. Out of the good treasure of their hearts they can bring forth nothing else but good things, and if any be otherwise minded let him beware, and correct the difficulty of the heart and not merely of the head.

We can imagine better than we can portray the loving sentiments of Lazarus and his sisters toward Jesus, the one they esteemed so highly, the one who, by calling Lazarus forth from the tomb, had demonstrated his Messiahship and that in him was the resurrection and the life power. This was probably the first visit the Lord had made to the Bethany home since that great event.

Apparently our Lord had friends in various walks of life; a few were rich, some were poor, some in moderate circumstances. The Bethany household was apparently of a comfortable class, as was evidenced by the fact that they had their own home, that they had their own tomb, and that on this occasion Mary was able as well as willing to spend a considerable sum of money in doing honor to the Lord by anointing him with the very precious spikenard. This reminds us of the prayer of one of old, "Give me neither poverty nor riches." Riches are a great snare to the many, and the Lord's word assures us that not many rich will enter the Kingdom. The attractions of the present life to them will prove too powerful and hinder their fulfilment of their consecration vows – to sacrifice their all, to lay all at Jesus' feet, to become merely his stewards in the use of their temporal opportunities and blessings, and to use these wisely in his service and in such a manner as to demonstrate the love and loyalty they have professed.

In many respects to have a moderate competency in life is very desirable, permitting a more generous treatment of others, greater

hospitality, etc.; yet even moderate prosperity seems to be more than the majority can stand and yet be faithful. Consequently we find in fact what our Lord declared, namely, that the heirs of the Kingdom are chiefly of the poor of this world – chiefly of those who have little and who have little hope for getting more, and whose minds consequently are more readily turned to the heavenly things which the Lord has promised to those who love him supremely.

To whatever extent, therefore, we have comfortable surroundings, such as were possessed by the Bethany household – to whatever extent we have the good things of this present life – in that same proportion we need to be specially on guard against the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches and the ambitions and hopes and aims of the world, lest these should lead our hearts away from the loyalty and devotion to the Lord and his cause which full faith and trust should inspire and sustain. Evidently it is possible to be poor in spirit without being actually in poverty, but the more there is of earthly prosperity apparently more grace is needed to keep us in the narrow way.

"OINTMENT OF SPIKENARD VERY COSTLY."

The two sisters evidently had the matter planned between them: Martha served at the table and Mary served in an especial manner with the ointment. Oriental tables were a combination of couch and table, and the guests were properly described as reclining at a feast. It was customary to rest the forepart of the body [R3535 : page 103] upon one elbow while using the other hand to convey the food to the mouth, etc. Our Lord thus reclining, both his head and his feet were very conveniently accessible to Mary, who proceeded to anoint first his head and afterward his feet with the ointment.

The word ointment gives rather a misimpression; the word perfume would more nearly describe the liquid used. Its value is incidentally mentioned as more than three hundred pence (v. 5). These silver pence represent about sixteen cents each, and thus

estimated the alabaster flask of perfume was worth about forty-eight dollars; but counting each penny or *denarius* as a day's wages at that time (Matt. 20:2), the three hundred pence would be equivalent to a year's wages of a working man, or about three hundred dollars to six hundred dollars as compared with our day. [R3535 : page 104]

This was very precious ointment indeed by whichever calculation we reckon it, yet that the statement is not overdrawn is attested by ancient literature. For instance, we are told that Horace offered to give a cask of wine for a very small box of spikenard – Odes, Ovid, IV, XII, XVII. A perfume even in our day has been rated as high as \$100.00 per ounce, namely, attar of roses. At this price, Mary's "pound" would have been worth \$1,200.00.

"SHE HATH DONE WHAT SHE COULD."

The use of such expensive perfumes was very rare: indeed, even the emperors used it sparingly, but when used it was generally poured upon the head. Mary followed this custom in pouring it upon the Lord's head, as Matthew and Mark recount; but having done this, she proceeded to his feet and anointed them with the perfume, and then wiped his feet with the long tresses of her hair. What a picture of loving devotion is here given us! The feet, always recognized as the humblest and lowest members of the human frame – the hair of the head, especially of woman, always recognized as a special treasure and glory to her – here thus brought together in a way which signified that Mary esteemed her Lord and Master as infinitely above and beyond her. She had recognized him first as the most wonderful of men, speaking as never man spake; she had come afterwards to understand that he was a great teacher, especially sent at a special time; and finally, through the awakening of Lazarus from the sleep of death, she had evidence that the power of the Almighty was in him, that he was none other than the Son of God, and she appropriately did him the reverence due to his exalted station.

She could not put him on the throne of earth, but she would show that she was his devoted servant forever; she could not glorify him before all the people of Israel, but she could glorify and honor him in her own home; she could not tell his praises and sing his worth, but she could sing and make melody in her own heart, and pour upon him a perfume which not only filled her home with its sweet savor, but which has yielded a tender fragrance to the honor of womankind in general from her day to the present time. "She hath done what she could," said the Lord – she has shown her devotion to the best of her ability. How true the remainder of our Lord's prophecy on the subject, "Wherever this Gospel is preached, this thing shall be told as a memorial of her." A sweet memorial of a sweet character and loving heart. Considered in the light of the odor and blessing and refreshment which it has shed upon all of the Lord's people throughout this Gospel age, Mary's alabaster jar of precious perfume, very costly, has proven to be extremely cheap.

"MIGHT HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO THE POOR."

Our lesson says that Judas protested against such a waste of money, and explains that it was not because he cared so much for the poor, as that he was a thief and regretted that the amount spent for the perfume had not been handed to him as the treasurer for the group of disciples, so that he might have misappropriated it to himself. This thought is more particularly shown in the revised version, which renders it, "He was a thief, and having the bag took away what was put therein." Matthew says "the disciples" – Mark says, "There were some" – but John mentions Judas only as doing this murmuring against the expense involved in Mary's service to her Lord. Quite probably all the accounts are correct. Judas, no doubt, was the instigator of the murmuring, some more quickly and more thoroughly shared his sentiments, and the remainder of the apostles, probably influenced by the majority, were inclined to yield and to agree that the extravagance was wrong. But Jesus set the whole matter at rest in a few words, saying, "Let her alone; against the day

of my burying hath she kept this. The poor ye have always with you, but me ye have not always."

Many of the Lord's disciples to-day need to reconstruct their ideas on the subject of economy. True, it is necessary for us to be provident not wasteful, and economical not extravagant. Our Lord frequently inculcated this lesson, as, for instance, when he directed the gathering up of the fragments of broken food after feeding the multitude. But there is a proper place to draw the line. The person who is economical and penurious in his dealings with the Lord is sure to be the loser thereby, as the Scriptures declare, "The liberal soul shall be made fat;" and again, "There is he that scattereth yet increaseth, and there is he that withholdeth more than is meet [proper] and it tendeth to poverty."

It is a different matter for us to learn to be economical in respect to our own affairs and to be liberal to the extent of extravagance in matters which pertain to the Lord and his service. We sometimes sing, "Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring," but he who brings large petitions to the throne of grace should be sure also that he bring with him a large alabaster box of perfume for the Lord – not hoping thereby to merit the Lord's favor nor to perfume his requests, but as a mark of his appreciation of blessings already received. Those who bring the alabaster boxes of perfume of praise and thankfulness very generally have little to ask. Rather they realize that they are already debtors to such an extent that they can never show properly their appreciation of divine favor. Properly they recognize that day by day they are receiving at the Lord's hands exceedingly and abundantly more than they could ask or wish, and that in the spiritual blessings alone they have what satisfies their longings as nothing else can do. Such more nearly follow the course of Mary and bring alabaster boxes of perfume to the Lord – their prayers and thanksgiving of heart; and asking nothing, but giving thanks for all things, they receive from the Master such an outpour of blessing that they are not able to contain it.

Those who view the matter rightly must certainly feel that none of us have anything worthy to present to our Lord – that our very best, our most costly gifts or sacrifices, are not worthy of him and but feebly express the real sentiments of our hearts. How glad we are if our humble efforts are accepted of the Lord, and how we hope that ultimately we shall hear the same sweet voice saying of us, "He hath done what he could," "She hath done what she could."

The poet Tennyson beautifully pictures the scene we have been considering in the following lines: – **[R3535 : page 105]**

"Her eyes are homes of silent prayer,
Nor other thought her mind admits
But, he was dead, and there he sits,
And He that brought him back is there.

"Then one deep love doth supersede
All other, when her ardent gaze
Roves from the living brother's face,
And rests upon the Life indeed.

"All subtle thought, all curious fears,
Borne down by gladness so complete,
She bows, she bathes the Saviour's feet
With costly spikenard and with tears."

THE POOR EVER WITH US.

Our Lord's prophecy that poverty would continue throughout this Gospel age has been amply fulfilled. Looking forward into the future, we rejoice to know that then, under the reign of the Kingdom, there will be no more poor, no more sorrow, no more want. "Every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, with none to molest or make him afraid." Those changed conditions will not be the result of human evolution, human theories, co-operative societies, unions,

trusts, etc. All these various panaceas for making everybody rich and comfortable and happy have failed in the past and will continue to be failures in the future. Because of sin warping and twisting the very fibers of humanity, and through selfishness and ambition and desire working upon the warped and twisted elements of humanity, pain, suffering and want are sure to continue as long as sin continues. And sin is sure to continue until the great Messiah takes to himself his great power and reigns, and subdues sin and all that is contrary to righteousness and truth and establishes the latter upon the earth.

Until that glorious day shall come, all through the night of weeping, for now more than eighteen hundred centuries, the poor have been with us and many of them have been the Lord's precious ones. Poverty has proven itself a blessing in many ways in many senses of the word under present conditions. Not only does the fact of poverty and the fear of poverty help to keep many in line and make them active in the battle of life, and thus develop in them overcoming qualities, but, on the other hand, the fact that there is poverty, the fact that we have friends and neighbors who need our care and need assistance, is a blessing to those who are more comfortably situated themselves, in that it develops their sympathy, patience, love, their desire to do good, their desire [R3536 : page 105] to help. He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord and the Lord will repay him. This promise is so rich and so plainly stated that the wonder is that there are not more willing to make investments in harmony with it, and to realize that the Lord not only repays, but gives large interest.

"ME YE HAVE NOT ALWAYS."

The opportunity for honoring the Lord was limited – a little while and his sufferings would be ended and he would be glorified, beyond the evil, beyond the power of human attention. It was appropriate then, when viewed from the right standpoint, that Mary should spend a great price upon her Lord – that the head upon which fell the slanders and anathemas of the chief priests and doctors of

divinity of that day, and upon which shortly the crown of thorns would be placed, should now be honored by one amongst a few of those who realized his true worth, his true grandeur, his Kingship, that he was indeed the Son of God. It was appropriate, too, that those feet which had trodden the valleys and hillsides of Palestine, and that were so weary at times, and that symbolized the feet of consecration treading the narrow, rugged way, and that so soon would be pierced with the nails on the cross, should now be highly honored by one who appreciated and trusted them, who loved them and who was seeking to walk in the Master's steps.

When we get the right view of the matter, we can indeed sympathize with our Lord's expression, "Let her alone," Trouble her not, Take it not from her – as though when the first motion was made to use the spikenard the apostles had wished to have it spared that they might sell it, and as though our Lord hindered them from using persuasion to that end, saying, Let her alone, do not hinder her.

Spikenard Mary represents one of the most beautiful elements of Christian character amongst the Lord's people from that day until the present. For be it remembered that the entire Church of Christ in the largest sense is the "body of Christ," as expressed by Jesus and also by the apostles. The Mary class, who would rather purchase perfume at a great cost whereby to serve the anointed Church, the body of Christ, than to spend the same upon themselves, is still with us, and has been of the Church for these eighteen centuries. Not only was the Head of the body anointed, perfumed, honored, comforted, cheered, but all of the members since have likewise received a blessing from this class, this spikenard Mary class. It is composed not always of the orators, the wealthy or the wise – its ministry is unostentatious and to many, especially of the world, it seems foolishness and waste – but the Lord appreciates it, and so do the members of his body who are comforted and refreshed thereby. Blessing be upon this Mary class!

HONOR TO MEMBERS – HONOR TO HEAD.

But if there have been members all the way down who have been comforted in this way, should we not expect some particular blessing of the kind in the end of this age, upon the "feet" members? According to our understanding we are now in the closing of this age – the Head has been glorified, many of the members of the body have passed beyond the veil, and only the feet are here. Perhaps this very picture of Mary's anointing the feet of our Lord as well as his head constitutes a type or picture of what we may expect in this present time. And here comes in a beautiful feature of the divine arrangement – we may all be of the Mary class as well as of the feet class. In other words, each member of the body of Christ may to some extent serve the fellow-members of the body, the fellow-members of the feet, as Mary served the feet of Jesus.

Let each one of the Lord's true people as he studies this matter conclude that by the grace of God he will join the Mary class, and purchase spikenard very costly and lavish it upon the feet of the body of Christ – the Church – the true members. This will mean love, sympathy, kindness, gentleness, patience and assistance and comfort. It will mean large and growing development in all the fruits and graces of the Spirit, whose combined name is Love.

Dear readers, let us each remember that while it is impossible for us to do as Mary did in this lesson, it is the privilege of each to do still more important things for each other, for the brethren of Christ now in the world, the feet members of his body. Hers was a literal **[R3536 : page 106]** perfume and in time lost its virtue; but the little acts of kindnesses and helpfulness which we may render one to another will never lose their merit in the estimation of our Lord, and never lose their fragrance to all eternity in the estimation of each other. The little things of life, the little words, the little tokens, the kind looks, the little assistances by the way, these and not great things are our possibilities, our perfumes, the one for the other.

"WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET."

The washing of the feet in olden times in oriental lands was very necessary to the comfort, and hence to wash one another's feet would signify to comfort and refresh one another even in the most menial services. This is the essence of our Lord's lesson to us, that we should be glad for any opportunity for serving one another, for comforting and helping one another, however menial the service. Apply this now to the expression of our lesson. Mary washed our Lord's feet with perfume, and the Mary class, the most loving and devoted class in the Church, are to help one another, to wash one another's feet; and they are to do so not in the rudest and clumsiest manner imaginable, but, inspired by love and devotion one to another, they are to wash one another's feet with the kindness and sympathy and love and appreciation symbolized by Mary's spikenard; and their comforting of one another is to be with that love and solicitation which was represented by Mary's using the very locks of her head for her Master's feet.

We see some evidence that this love, this spikenard-Mary love and sympathy, is growing amongst the members of the Lord's body; that as they perceive the animosity of the world and the flesh and the Adversary against the Lord's anointed they are all the more devoted one to another, and all the more disposed to honor one another with care and love and sympathy, and to speak and act generously and kindly one toward another. We are glad of this – we know of no better evidence of growth in grace on the part of the consecrated. Let the good work go on until we shall have filled the house with the perfume of love, until the whole world shall take knowledge of how Christians love one another – not in a narrow or partisan sense, but in the broad sense that Christ loved all who love the Father and all who sought to walk in the Father's ways.

LET US DO IT NOW.

If Mary had waited another week she might have used the perfume upon herself but not upon the Lord – within a week from the time of this incident our Lord was buried, the tomb was sealed, the Roman Guard stood before it and there would have been no opportunity even to have poured it upon his dead body. How much better that she improved the opportunity, that she showed the Lord her devotion while he was still her guest. The parallel is here: it will not be long until all the members of the body of Christ will have filled their share of the sufferings and have passed beyond the veil "changed."

Wisdom tells us that we should not delay in bringing our alabaster boxes of ointment and pouring their contents upon our dear ones of the body of Christ, the feet of Christ. No matter if they do not notice us, or think of us, or pour any upon us as members of the feet; let us do our part, let us be of the Mary class, let us pour out the sweet perfume upon others, and the house, the Church of the Lord, will be filled with the sweet odor, even though some disciples might mistakingly charge us with being extravagant with our love and with our devotion, not understanding that the Master by and by will say again, "Let her alone, she hath done what she could." Our Lord's estimate of this spikenard and anointing is that it is all that we can do – nothing could be more or better. It indicates love, great love – and "love is the fulfilling of the law."

"Let us consider one another," said the Apostle – consider one another's weaknesses, consider one another's trials, consider one another's temptations, consider one another's efforts to war a good warfare against the world, the flesh and the Adversary – consider one another's troubles in the narrow way against opposition from within and without, and as we do so it will bring to our hearts sympathy, a sympathy which will take pleasure in pouring out the spikenard

perfume, very costly, purest and best, upon all who are fellow-members of the one body.

Some one has spoken of the great "Society of Encouragers" who do so much to help encourage and uplift the footsore and weary in the pathway of life. It is not a great society so far as members are concerned, but it is a great society from the Lord's standpoint and from the standpoint of all who have been helped and encouraged by it. Spikenard Mary might have been said to have been a prominent member in this society of encouragers. We may well imagine that as our dear Redeemer was thinking of the severe trials, including the cross, of the week already begun, Mary's manifestation of love and devotion would come to him as a special encouragement and refreshment of spirit. So few seemed to understand him! even his disciples did not appreciate the situation. Here was one who at least loved him, had confidence in him. No doubt it gave him courage for the remaining days of his journey.

THE TRUTH TERSELY STATED.

Respecting the propriety of using present opportunities for the comfort and encouragement one of another, a writer has pointedly said:

"Don't keep the alabaster boxes of your love and tenderness sealed up till your friends are dead. Fill their lives with gladness. Speak approving, cheering words while they can hear them...If my friends **[R3537 : page 106]** have alabaster boxes full of the fragrant perfume of sympathy and affection laid away, which they intend to break over my body, I would rather they would bring them out in my weary and troubled hours, and open them, that I may be refreshed and cheered by them while I need them...I would rather have a plain coffin without a flower, a funeral without a eulogy, than life without the sweetness of love and sympathy. ...Flowers on the coffin cast no fragrance backward on the weary road."

Mrs. Preston's poem, "Ante Mortem," expresses the same thought thus: –

... "Had I but heard
One breath of applause, one cheering word –
One cry of '*Courage!*' amid the strife,
So weighted for me with death or life –
How would it have nerved my soul to strain
Thro' the whirl of the coming surge again."

SACRIFICE OF SWEET ODOR.

The Apostle, speaking of the ministries of the [R3537 : page 107] Church one for another, says that ours is a sacrifice of sweet odor unto God, but again he adds that the Gospel referred to is of life unto life to some and of death unto death to others. That is to say, good deeds, kind words and efforts will be appreciated by those who are in the right attitude of heart to appreciate them, while on the contrary the same good deeds will arouse offence and constitute a bad odor to those who are in a wrong condition of heart. How often have we seen it so, that with our best endeavors to serve the feet of Christ some have been comforted and refreshed, others have been angered – to one the effort was a sweet odor, to the others it was an offensive odor, because of their wrong attitude of heart toward the Lord and toward the body of Christ – because, perhaps, of their ambitions or whatnot that were interfered with.

It was just so at Bethany: the sweet odors that filled the house, and the blessing and refreshment that came to Mary in connection with the ministration, had a very different effect upon Judas. He was angry; his selfishness hindered his appreciation of the honor done to the Lord; he could think only of himself and what he had hoped to get out of the transaction, and how, so far as he was concerned, the whole matter was a waste. The sourness that came to his heart because of its wrong attitude is indicated by the testimony that he straightway went to the chief priests to bargain with them for the

betrayal of Jesus. Let us, then, dear brethren, see to it that our hearts are in a loving attitude toward the Lord and not in a selfish attitude – that we appreciate everything done in his name and for his body, and that we be not self-seeking. Otherwise the result will be with us the savor of death unto death, as it was with Judas.

This concludes our lesson. It was the next day probably that the Jews began to gather in considerable numbers to see Jesus and Lazarus, and to take counsel respecting the putting of them to death – "for the good of the cause." And, by the way, let us remember that the "good of the cause" has nearly always been the basis for every mean and despicable act against the Truth from first to last. Let us beware of such a sectarian spirit; let us see to it that our love for the Lord and all of his brethren is sincere, and not a personal and selfish one for ourselves or some denomination, otherwise we know not into what evils we might be led.

