

Mark 14:3-9 (1984 NIV)
Have You Done What You Can?

Introduction

In his autobiography, *Just as I Am*, the late evangelist, Billy Graham, wrote about a conversation he had with John F. Kennedy shortly after the latter's election.

On the way back to the Kennedy house, the president-elect stopped the car and turned to Graham and asked, "Do you believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ?"

Graham replied, "I most certainly do."

The president-elect asked again, "Well, does my church believe it?"

The evangelist reassured, "They have it in their creeds."

Kennedy said, "But they don't preach it. They don't tell us much about it. I'd like to know what you think."

Graham then went on to explain what the Bible said about Christ coming the first time, dying on the Cross, rising from the dead, and then promising that he would come back again.

"Only then," Graham concluded, "are we going to have permanent world peace."

"Very interesting. We'll have to talk more about that someday." Kennedy responded.

Several years later, the two met again at the 1963 National Prayer Breakfast.

Kennedy then took the opportunity to ask, "Billy, could you ride back to the White House with me? I'd like to see you for a minute."

"Mr. President, I've got a fever," Graham gently protested. "I am weak and I also don't want to give you this thing. Couldn't we wait and talk some other time?"

"Of course," Kennedy said graciously.

But the two would never meet again. Later that year, Kennedy was shot dead. The days following the assassination, Billy Graham commented that the missed opportunity to find out what was on Kennedy's mind then and to help him with some answers was

constantly haunting him. It was a deep sense of regret over an unfinished task, as if he had not done what he could.

(<https://bible.org/illustration/president-john-f-kennedy>)

As we come to worship the Lord today, are we also burdened by a deep sense of regret for missing the opportunity to do what we can? Perhaps we are lamenting:

- “If only I have done this, then ...”
- “If only I have done that, then ...”

Perhaps some of us are troubled by such a feeling of having missed an opportunity to make a difference, or left some important task unfinished. But today, let’s take heart and find encouragement in the words of Jesus.

Our text today tells of an event in Jesus’ life that took place just a few hours before He was betrayed by one of His own and arrested by His enemies.

- We find Jesus in the home of a man called Simon the leper. He’s probably the man healed by Jesus in Mark 1:40.
- This Simon was hosting a Passover Eve dinner in his home with Jesus as the VIP.
- This was perhaps a special meal that also served as a reunion for those who had been ministered to by the Lord in one way or another.
- A woman joined the party and poured a whole jar of perfume on Jesus’ head.
- In the parallel account in John 12:1-8, this woman was identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.
- And Mary had good reasons to be overflowing with gratitude to the Lord—Jesus had earlier accepted her sitting at His feet to learn from His teaching, just like His other disciples; Jesus had also raised her brother Lazarus from the dead.
- Thus, overwhelmed with a great sense of gratitude, Mary broke her jar of perfume and poured it all onto Jesus’ head.
- However, this display of devotion to Jesus drew scathing remarks from some of those who were there—Mary was made to feel that what she did was a gross act of negligence towards the poor. She gave all she had to Jesus, but she was made to feel that she had neglected some much needed kindness or generosity to the poor.
- But hear the encouraging and affirming words of Jesus in His response in Mark 14:8, “She did what she could.”

As we learn from this biblical account, can we too be encouraged and affirmed by the same words of the Lord today? Yes, we can! Yes, we can when we know that ...

I. **We have done what we can with what we have (vv. 3-5).**

3 While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. 4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? 5 It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

The text tells us that Mary (the woman) came with some very expensive perfume.

- It was top quality perfume made of pure nard.
- Ladies generally like perfume, especially if it is of top quality. And Mary could have rightfully kept the very expensive perfume to herself, and nobody could have blamed her.
- Even if she wanted to anoint Jesus as the honoured guest, a couple of drops could be sufficient. No one would expect her to break the jar and poured all the perfume over Jesus.
- Thus, to some who were there, it seemed like an act of overdoing; wasteful and extravagant.
- But we must remember that Mary had truly tasted the goodness of the Lord before.
- Thus, her act was only a spontaneous expression of gratitude to the Lord; and gratitude can sometimes move us to be spontaneously extravagant.

I recall this conversation with a man who was married with three children when I was teaching in the seminary. He had left a top management position to be trained in the seminary. As we closed our conversation, I asked him how I could pray for him.

He wanted me to pray with him for his wife. She was still troubled by his decision to give up a good position to be trained at the seminary for full-time Christian vocation.

She would often question him, "What will our relatives and friends think about you?"

Giving all this away seemed too wasteful and extravagant to her. She felt that he was giving up all the bright prospects and opportunities before him too much and too soon; that he was leaving behind something unfinished in his life.

As we paused and prayed together, I gathered that the Lord had been good and merciful to him, and through a chain of events that he did not elaborate, he was doing what he did out of faithful obedience as well as

deep gratitude to the Lord. Indeed, gratitude can move us to be spontaneously extravagant.

Some people questioned and chided Mary, “Why waste all this perfume?”

In the same way, some people may have questioned and chided us, “Why have you done this? Why so unnecessarily wasteful? Why overdo it?”

The same people who chided Mary also accused her, “Why have you not given to the poor? Why have you not done this instead? Why so negligent?”

We too may have heard similar complaints being directed at us. And when we hear these words, and play them back again and again in our minds, we can be made to feel that we have left something unfinished because we have not done what we can with what we have.

Mary was very much a misunderstood person on that occasion.

- She was rebuked harshly (v. 5).
- She was made to feel that she was wasteful in pouring out all the perfume, and negligent in helping the poor.
- She was made to feel that she had left something unfinished because she had not done what she could with what she had—instead of wasting all the perfume on Jesus, she should have sold it all for a good sum to help the poor.
- But she was doing what she could with what she had for Jesus—her act was not for self, but for the Lord.
- She could not stop the Lord from being crucified with what she had.
- But she could use what she had to prepare the Lord “in advance” for a decent burial—the Lord commended her in v. 8, “She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.”

There will always be critics in life. Complaints and fault-finding are always hard to bear, but they keep us honest by asking ourselves questions like:

- “Have I done what I can with what I have?”
- “What makes me do what I have done with what I have?”

While the critics of Mary disapproved of her, the Lord commended her and defended her before her critics, “She did what she could with what she had and did it out of gratitude to me.”

People may have misunderstood us, but Jesus knows best when we have done what we can with what we have for Him. Yes, we can be made to feel guilty about something unfinished or neglected by the words of others. But if we have truly done what we can with what we have out of gratitude to the Lord, then let’s be encouraged by the words of Jesus spoken on behalf of Mary before her critics, “She did what we could for me.”

These same words of Jesus can also uplift us when we know that ...

II. We have done what we can while we still can (vv. 6-9).

6 "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. 8 She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. 9 I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

We see here that Mary had that spiritual sensitivity to do the right thing at the right time.

- You remember the record of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. While Martha was busy preparing many dishes of food in the kitchen, Mary did just one thing—i.e. sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning from Him as He taught His disciples. And Jesus commended Mary in v. 42, "... but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."
- Here in our text today, Mary again exercised the same sensitivity to do the right thing at the right time—i.e. to anoint the Lord with her perfume. And she acted spontaneously without hesitance.
- In fact, tomorrow would be too late because Jesus would be crucified by then, even though Mary was not consciously aware of this. In other words, she did what she could while she still could.
- Mary acted out of her devotion and gratitude to the Lord while others complacently presumed that they would always have Jesus with them. Yes, these others presumed that they would do something to show their devotion and gratitude to the Lord, but they could do it some other day, some other time.
- Mary had that spiritual sensitivity that the others lacked—i.e. to do the right thing at the right time; she did what she could while she still could.

Unlike those who criticised her, the Lord commended Mary for doing what she could with what she had while she still could because He knew soon He would no longer be with them.

- Thus, while the others called her act as "wasteful", the Lord affirmed it as "beautiful"—He said in v. 6, "She has done a beautiful thing to me."
- The others considered her act as something that should be best forgotten, but the Lord memorialised it by saying in v. 9, "... wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Indeed, the criticism of others can make us feel that we are wasting away some resources or opportunities; that we are leaving something unfinished because they view us as doing the wrong thing at the wrong time.

- Mary might have been reduced to this state of mind if not for the words of Jesus.
- By His approval, Jesus was saying to Mary, “You have done what you can with what you have while you still can. You are doing the right thing at the right time.”
- By implication, Jesus was rebuking the critics of Mary, “You have not yet done what you can with what you have while you still can. So, don’t criticise the one who has done so!”

Indeed, there are things in life we ought not to leave unfinished or undone. Are we doing these while we still can? Or are we putting them aside for now, thinking that we can still do them at another time? What can you and I do for Jesus now while we still can?

- Some of us may have loved ones who are sick and who do not know Christ. And one thing we can do now while we still can is to share the love of Christ with them in words and works. There may be criticisms from people around us; people who misunderstand us. But we do what we can while we still can out of our love for these loved ones and in obedience to the Lord. Yes, what we can do is to speak and show the love of Christ for our loved ones by our witness; what we cannot do is to convict them of their need for Christ (this kind of conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit). So we do what we can while we still can as we prayerfully seek the Lord to use our verbal and visible witness to impact our loved ones concerning their need for Jesus. In fact, Jesus hinted that His people should do what they could while they still could because they would not always have Him with them. This reminds us that our loved ones will not always be with us. So, let’s do what we can while we still can in reaching out to our loved ones, even if they are now still in the pink of health.
- Sometimes, we fail to do what we can while we still can because we allow failures to cripple us. We remain where we are and allow opportunities to pass by. We say, “Not yet. I need first to get over this setback or disappointment. I will do it sometime later, but not now.” We need to stop looking back and to seek the Lord help us end the old chapter of defeat so that we can start a new chapter of victory in Him.
- In our relationships, especially with our loved ones, we need to ask, “Who are those we need to give due and special attention because they deserve it from us?” To a loved one who is perhaps aged but can still hear, let’s learn to say kind and encouraging words to him/her. To a loved one who is perhaps frail but still around, let’s learn to spend quality time with him/her.

The story is told of a young man who stood before a judge to be sentenced for forgery. The judge had been a friend of the young man's father who was well-known for his books on the law of trusts.

The judge asked the young man sternly, "Do you remember your father, that father whom you have disgraced?"

The young man answered, "Yes, I remember him clearly. When I went to him for advice or companionship, he would say, 'Go away, son. I'm busy writing.' Well, my father finished writing his books, and here I am."

Indeed, let's not play down the importance of relating with people, and play up the urgency of doing things, and then end up not doing what we can do while we still can with people who matter much in our lives.

Many who have lost a loved one have often lamented, "I wish I have spent more time with him/her while he/she was still with me." This is indeed the sad realisation of having left something unfinished because we have not done what we can with what we have while we still can.

Conclusion

Mary did what we could for the Lord.

- She did what she could with what she had.
- She did what she could with what she had while she still could.

Think of the different roles you play and the resources you are blessed with.

- What will you do with what you have for Jesus today?
- What will you do with what you have while you still can?
- When are you going to do it?

Let's seek the Lord to help us follow Mary's example so that we may not be haunted by the grief or guilt that comes from a sense of regret over something unfinished or undone—i.e. not doing what we can with what we have while we still can in the Lord. Amen!