

## **Living with Abandon**

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Not too long ago the charge was leveled against me that I am “OCD”. For those not familiar with the lingo, that is shorthand for a condition that psychologists refer to as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. When the label was thrown at me my defenses went up and I immediately felt the urge to lay out a case which would serve to demonstrate the falsity of the charge. In this case the accusation was intended to address my pursuit of spirituality. I was ready to defend my *disorder* even though in reality the person offering the label did not mean it as a criticism; at least I do not think so. Nonetheless, the thought of my honest attempt to serve God and love others being questioned in such a manner caused me to pause and reflect on how I go about living my faith. Rather than offer the defense which was being constructed in my mind I chose to remain silent and ponder the charge.

Over the course of the last several days, as I have thought about the charge, I have wondered why I was so quick to rally my inner defenses as I made an attempt to demonstrate, if only to myself, my level-headed approach to faith and life in general. Yet, the more I think about it, the more I am inclined to believe that my pursuit of God ought to look more and more like it is my obsession. Instead of viewing this person’s comment as an affront to my character, I have come to realize that, perhaps, it was actually an affirmation of my heart being pointed in the direction God intended it. I will explain.

I am a strong proponent of challenging Christians to recognize the need to demonstrate the relevance of the gospel to an on-looking world. If we are to ever have any lasting impact upon the lives of others, and if we are to know the surpassing greatness of God’s ability to transform lives, we must intentionally live our lives in a way which will draw others and gain a hearing for the gospel. In our churches, our daily life, and all of our interactions with others we ought to demonstrate the beauty, grace, and attraction of a life lived for God. Our faith is a matter of the heart, mind, will, and emotions. Likewise, our faith in God is on sure ground and can withstand any academic or philosophical scrutiny leveled against it. As Christians we should be able to demonstrate these realities with clarity whenever the need arises. We ought to be current, aware, intellectually vibrant, emotionally stable, and winsome as we live our lives and present our faith. But there is a catch. This is a two-sided coin, as they say.

Acts 2:42-47 gives the reader a picture of the early church. This vision, at least in theory, is the goal of every church community in existence. What we see in this passage is a picture of a group of Christians living out their faith so vibrantly that the surrounding community looks on with “awe”. So compelling was the life of these Christ-followers that many in the community were coming to faith daily as a result of the activities of these believers. This dynamic picture of the church advancing on a daily basis is the goal of any true believer. It is why we live and breathe. This is the kind of Kingdom expansion that God has called us to. But, here comes the catch.

The response of onlookers is not always so wonderful, nor was it always so wonderful for those in the newly budding community in the first century. Even when we are living as God has called us to live we will find many detractors. In fact, as you continue to read the book of Acts, you find a God-fearing community that experiences many wonderful victories, but also great opposition. It is never the case that everyone, all the time, embraces the call of the gospel no matter how authentic the witness. Indeed, if you follow the scriptures and the history surrounding the early church you will note just how intense the persecution of the church became.

These realities being so, how then are we to live? This is the question, isn't it? The answer, I believe, and Jesus seems to affirm, is found in the story of a woman in scripture. Her name is Mary. It could be MaryAnn, Mary Jane, Mary Jo, Mary Katherine, or any other version of Mary you can think of. In truth, your name, my name, the names of your family and friends, or anyone else could just as well be placed into the story. Mary's story, affirmed by Jesus in a unique way, ought to be the story of each of us. This story, a story of God inspired OCD, captures the heart of God for every living human being. In the unfolding of this marvelous scene we find out what it means to be loved with abandon and what it means to love with abandon, without any fear or worry of the consequences. This story, a story of two Mary's (albeit in the same person), demonstrates what it means to abandon the unlovely, and shows the compelling need to embrace the loveliest of all things.

We find her story in Mark 14, beginning in verse 3. Jesus is having dinner at the home of Simon the Leper, and is reclining at the table. Dinner seems to be going as normal and all the guests are enjoying themselves. Then, suddenly, amazingly, shockingly, a woman, known by them all as one of His followers, steps up with a look of wonder on her face and love in her eyes, and the scene changes dramatically. Here is how it reads,

*And while He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over His head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii (one denarii was a day's wages for a laborer) and given to the poor. And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you will always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.'*

Wow! Three hundred denarii, in one act, gone, just like that. That is obsessive compulsive disorder defined! Why such excessive showmanship? What is wrong with that woman? Now what is she going to do for money? It will take her three hundred days of labor to make up for that nutty act!

Can't you just hear those at dinner thinking these things to themselves and whispering amongst each other? What is going on here?

What is clearly revealed in this passage is the promise of a life lived with God as one's True North. This Mary, who once lived a life making one bad choice after another, had come to know the surpassing greatness of God's love, and she, like the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, had come undone, unglued. In seeing herself as she really was, and in viewing her life for what it really was apart from God, Mary encountered the promise of a new love as revealed in the person of Jesus. So life altering was His love for her that she was captivated by it and fully surrendered all she was to it. She decided it was time for a new life. The more she learned of Him, the more she loved Him, and the more she loved Him, the more she desired to pursue life outside the norm.

The transformation of a woman looking for love in all the wrong places into a woman who gave love with reckless abandon is what Jesus points to as the thing which will be talked about for the remainder of recorded history. Jesus is suggesting that this is what a relationship with God is all about. Knowing God and being known by Him ultimately comes down to our recognition that He is our True North. The compass of reality, hope, peace, and abundant life points to Him and Him alone. He is our destination.

But why such extravagance? Why did Jesus not temper the woman who seemed so reckless in her "spending" of love? And why are those with a more "stable" view of displaying one's affections not commended by Jesus?

These questions and the answers to these questions are absolutely critical to understanding the heart of God for us. Jesus is aware that unless our souls are utterly consumed with a constant fixation with Him, we will wander. In our wandering we find ourselves gambling away the life He has offered to us. We should remind ourselves that it is this Jesus who called His disciples to leave everything else and follow him. This is the same Jesus who told the rich man who came to him asking how to inherit eternal life, "Now that you think you have followed the law perfectly and so established yourself as pious in the eyes of God, go and give everything you own to the poor and come follow me".

As the scriptures tell us, such an all out love for God, in the eyes of this man, was not an option. Consequently, he walked away depressed, dejected, and without a hope and a future because he wanted his possessions more than he wanted God (Mark 10:17ff). Mary came to realize that the life she was clinging too could not compare to the life being offered to her. The criticism of friends, family, and co-workers would not keep her from the life she was destined to live.

Mary, who had made a mess of her life, loves, and relationships, unlike the rich man, had finally come to a place where she was ready, willing, and compulsively compelled to give all of herself to the living God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The result was clear. She was made entirely new. For once in her life, as the song goes, she had met someone who really loved her as she ought to be loved. As a result, and for the first time in her life, she was able to love God and others with reckless abandon.

Mary's story shows us the importance of abandoning the desires and loves within us which are not in keeping with God's design for us. Her story also shows us just how liberated our souls become when we are transformed into the person God desires us to be. Jesus holds up this woman's story as uniquely singled out by God to trumpet God's call to each of us. The call, the call of Mary's transformed life, is the same call revealed in the parable of the Treasure Hidden in a Field, and in the parable of the Pearl of Great

Price (Matthew 13). What God is saying to each of us is simply this, “If you want to be whole, if you want to know your life is headed somewhere, if you want to know that you matter, then you must recognize that the fulfillment of that dream will unfold only as you abandon all the affections of your heart which lead you further away from God. Your life, a life of satisfaction, and thrilling adventure (not void of storms) is found only in an all out pursuit of the heart of Jesus.” He is the Pearl of Great Price, and the Treasure Hidden in a Field.

And so, we must ask ourselves, “Could I, like Mary, be accused of such *disorderly* conduct”? Likewise, to each of us the question comes, “Have you come to understand just how compulsive the love of God is for you?” The answer to that question shows up in your life on a daily basis. Actually, the answer to that question shows up in your life on a moment by moment basis. When was the last time you loved with Godly abandon? When was the last time you awoke in the middle of the night and prayed for someone you cared for? When was the last time you loved the unlovely? When was the last time you spent your drive time listening to praise music, worshipping the One who gives you breath? When have you ever loved another without any thought of what would be returned? When was the last time you continued to love another while that love was not returned? How are you doing with respect to abandoning those activities and desires which you know are less than God-honoring? Are you making God-centered choices, or are you just acting on the moment according to feelings?

Loving and living with abandon has two consequences. On the one hand, those who just don’t “get it” will look at you with disdain, just as they did Mary, accusing you of emotional instability, recklessness, and various disorders. Continue loving these people and sharing the truth with them. On the other hand, as you continue to love as God has loved you, saving you from the mess that is yourself, many will come to see the extravagance of God’s love and will find rest and hope for the first time. Those people will then begin to love others, more will be transformed, and through the ongoing cycle, just as it happened in the early church in the book of Acts, the Lord will add *daily* those who are being made into new creations.

So, the next time someone accuses you of going overboard in your faith walk, thank them, love them, and encourage them to consider the life of Mary, the one who chose an outrageous way of life. As Jesus told the onlookers over 2,000 years ago, the actions of this compulsive lover will be remembered and talked about throughout the ages. What was He saying? Simply put, He was suggesting that the meaning of life is wrapped up in that one act of reckless abandon. The life worth living is found in our abandoning the modus operandi of this world and in our choosing a more passionate pursuit of the One who made us, defines us, pursues us, and loves us with abandon. How compulsive was the love of the cross? Consider it. Choose today how you will live and who you will live for.

May God’s grace, peace, and life be yours-today.

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