
The Alabaster Flask

A Bible Study Guide

*On the women who gave everything they had,
and the God who received it*

"Her sins, which are many, are forgiven — for she loved much."

Luke 7:47

"She has done a beautiful thing to me."

Mark 14:6

Based on Luke 7:36–50 | John 12:1–8 | Matthew 26:6–13 | Mark 14:3–9

How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed for personal devotion or small group use. It moves through the blog post's two central passages — the unnamed woman in Luke 7 and Mary of Bethany in John 12 — examining the historical, cultural, and theological layers that deepen their meaning. Each section includes background context, the biblical text, and reflection questions.

Suggested approach:

- Read the passage aloud before each section.
- Take time with the reflection questions — there are no wrong answers.
- Use the 'Going Deeper' notes for further study.
- If studying in a group, assign a timekeeper — each section is ~20 min.

The World Behind the Stories

First-Century Jewish Dining Culture

Both anointing stories take place at formal meals. Understanding the setting is crucial to grasping how radical these women's actions were.

Reclining at table (triclinium): Wealthy first-century households in Roman-influenced Palestine hosted meals at a triclinium — three low couches arranged in a U-shape around a central table. Guests reclined on their left elbow, feet extending outward away from the table. This is why the unnamed woman could stand behind Jesus at his feet (Luke 7:38) and why Mary could anoint his feet (John 12:3) — the feet of a reclining guest pointed away from the table and were easily accessible.

Hospitality obligations: In Greco-Roman and Jewish culture, a host was expected to offer three things to an honoured guest: water to wash dusty feet (done by a servant), a kiss of greeting on the cheek, and oil for the head. Simon the Pharisee provided none of these (Luke 7:44–46). Jesus's public contrast — comparing the woman's extravagance with Simon's failure — would have been deeply shaming to Simon in front of his guests.

Open-house meals: It was common practice in first-century Palestine for uninvited people, particularly the poor, to enter a wealthy man's home during a banquet and stand along the walls. The unnamed woman's entry was socially unusual but not physically impossible.

Women, Hair, and Honour

In Jewish culture of the first century, a woman's hair was considered deeply intimate. Respectable women kept their hair covered in public. Letting one's hair down before men who were not one's husband was associated with immodesty or sexual availability. The Mishnah (Ketubbot 7:6) even lists a wife uncovering her hair in public as grounds for divorce without payment of the marriage settlement.

That both women wiped Jesus's feet with their unbound hair is therefore deeply significant: they surrendered the very symbol of their honour and respectability. It was a posture of total vulnerability. For the unnamed sinful woman, whose honour was already publicly lost, it was an act of extraordinary courage. For Mary, a respected disciple, it was a breathtaking act of humility.

Alabaster Flasks and Costly Perfume

Alabaster (alabastron): Alabaster is a soft, translucent stone quarried primarily in Egypt (near Alabastron, from which the name derives) and used throughout the ancient Mediterranean world to store precious ointments and perfumes. Because alabaster is slightly porous, it preserved the fragrance better than clay or glass. The stone was carved into long-necked flasks that were typically sealed at the neck — breaking the neck was the standard way to release the contents. This is likely what Mark 14:3 means when it says Mary 'broke' the flask.

Pure nard (spikenard): The perfume in both Bethany accounts (Matthew, Mark, John) is identified as nard — a fragrant ointment derived from the spikenard plant (*Nardostachys jatamansi*), native to the Himalayan region of India, Nepal, and China. It was imported along ancient trade routes and was among the most expensive substances in the ancient world. John 12:5 and Mark 14:5 both record Judas's complaint that it was worth 300 denarii — approximately a year's wages for a common labourer. The Song of Solomon (1:12; 4:13–14) mentions nard as a symbol of intimacy and devotion.

A note on the Luke 7 flask: The woman in Luke 7 is not identified as Mary of Bethany, and the ointment is not specified as nard. Luke's account is set earlier in Galilee, near the beginning of Jesus's ministry. The similarities (alabaster flask, feet, hair, weeping) have led some commentators across history to conflate the two accounts, but most modern scholars regard them as distinct events involving different women.

Women of 'Sinful' Reputation in First-Century Palestine

The Greek word used in Luke 7:37 is *hamartolos* — 'sinner' — used as a social label, likely indicating the woman worked as a prostitute. Understanding why women entered such work is crucial to reading this story without judgment:

- **Widowhood** without sons left women economically destitute.
- **Divorce** could be initiated by a husband for almost any reason (see Deuteronomy 24:1–4 and its rabbinic interpretation), leaving women without the marriage settlement if accused of misconduct.
- **Debt slavery** and poverty could force a woman into sexual labour as the only available income.
- **Sexual violence** and abandonment also left women in positions where marriage was no longer available to them.

For such women, society offered no rehabilitation pathway. They were permanently socially excluded from synagogue community, respectable households, and public religious life. The risk she took in entering a Pharisee's home — a man whose religious role included judging exactly this kind of person — is almost impossible to overstate.

The Unnamed Woman — Luke 7:36–50

Who Was Simon the Pharisee?

The Pharisees were a lay religious movement in Second Temple Judaism focused on rigorous Torah observance and ritual purity. They were generally respected community leaders. Simon's invitation to Jesus is significant: he was curious enough to host this controversial rabbi, yet sceptical enough to withhold the customary honours of hospitality. His internal reaction ('if this man were a prophet...') reveals his theological test: a true prophet would know what kind of woman this is, and therefore would refuse her touch.

Jesus subverts this entirely. He does know. And he receives her anyway. This is the theological heart of the scene.

The Two Debtors — A Parable Unpacked

Jesus responds to Simon's unspoken judgment with a parable (Luke 7:41–43). In the ancient world, debt was not merely financial — it carried deep shame. A debt forgiven was shame removed. The parable's logic: the one forgiven more loves more. Jesus applies this directly: the woman's extravagant display of devotion is evidence of extravagant forgiveness received, not a means of earning it.

This is theologically precise. Jesus does not say her love earned her forgiveness (v.47 is sometimes misread this way). The Greek construction ('hoti' — 'because') is better read as 'her great love shows that her many sins have been forgiven.' Her worship is the fruit, not the root, of her forgiveness.

The Passage — Luke 7:36–50 (NIV)

Luke 7:36–38

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Luke 7:44–48, 50

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven — as her great love has shown... Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Key Theological Themes

1. Grace that sees the whole person. Simon sees the woman's label. Jesus sees the woman. The same is true in every encounter Jesus has with social outcasts throughout Luke's Gospel (the tax collector Zacchaeus, the leper, the Gerasene demoniac).

2. Faith and salvation. 'Your faith has saved you' (v.50) uses the Greek word *sozo* — the same word used for both physical healing and spiritual salvation throughout Luke. It is her trust in Jesus, not her ritual act, that saves her.

3. Forgiveness produces love. This is the reversal of transactional religion: you don't earn grace by loving well; loving well is what grace produces in a person.

Reflection Questions — Part Two

Q1. Simon withheld the three customary honours from Jesus. What might his omissions reveal about his relationship to Jesus at this point?

Q2. The woman risked enormous social humiliation to enter Simon's house. What does this tell us about what she had encountered in Jesus?

Q3. Jesus says 'whoever has been forgiven little loves little' (v.47). How does a deeper awareness of our own need for forgiveness change the way we worship?

Q4. The woman is remembered only as 'a sinner' who becomes someone whose 'sins are forgiven.' How does Jesus rewrite identity?

Mary of Bethany — John 12:1–8 & Mark 14:3–9

Who Was Mary of Bethany?

Mary appears three times in the Gospels, always in the same posture: at Jesus's feet.

- **Luke 10:38–42** — She sits at Jesus's feet listening while Martha serves. Jesus defends her choice: 'Mary has chosen what is better.'
- **John 11:32** — When Jesus arrives after Lazarus's death, Mary falls at his feet weeping.
- **John 12:3 / Mark 14:3** — She anoints his feet with nard and wipes them with her hair.

In rabbinic tradition, 'sitting at the feet' of a teacher was the posture of a disciple. Mary's consistent positioning is a theological statement: she is a learner and follower in the fullest sense. The rabbis of the first century debated whether women could be taught Torah; Jesus's consistent affirmation of Mary's discipleship was countercultural.

The Timing: Six Days Before Passover

John 12:1 is precise: this anointing happens six days before Passover, just before Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12–16). The Passover season was saturated with themes of sacrifice, liberation, and lamb's blood. Jesus interprets Mary's anointing as preparation for his burial (John 12:7; Mark 14:8).

This is theologically staggering: Mary anoints a living man for burial. Jewish burial customs involved anointing the body with aromatic oils to honour the dead and mask the smell of decomposition. The women who went to the tomb on Easter morning (Mark 16:1) brought spices for this purpose — but arrived to find the tomb empty. Mary acts ahead of time, in faith, with extravagance. She may not have fully understood what she was doing, but Jesus receives it as prophetic.

Lazarus, Martha, and the Household of Bethany

Bethany was approximately 2 miles (3km) east of Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. It was Jesus's base when he visited Jerusalem. The family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus appears to have been relatively prosperous (they had their own tomb, John 11:38) and were close friends of Jesus. John 11:5 explicitly states: 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.'

The dinner in John 12 is specifically held in honour of Jesus, and Lazarus is present — the man Jesus raised from the dead just days before. The shadow of the cross falls over this meal: the chief priests are already plotting to kill both Jesus and Lazarus (John 12:10). Mary's anointing takes place in this context of imminent loss.

Judas's Objection

John 12:4–6 records Judas's protest and immediately interprets it: he did not care about the poor but was a thief who took from the communal money bag. The contrast is sharp: the one closest to Jesus who appears to be concerned with others' welfare is in fact self-serving; the woman who appears to be wasteful is in fact

the most clear-sighted person in the room about what is coming.

The same objection appears in Matthew 26:8 as coming from 'the disciples' collectively, suggesting the protest was widespread. Jesus's defence of Mary is firm and public.

The Passages — John 12:1–8 & Mark 14:3–9 (NIV)

John 12:1–8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.' He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief... 'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.'

Mark 14:6, 8–9

'Leave her alone,' said Jesus. 'Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me... She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.'

Key Theological Themes

- 1. Prophetic worship.** Mary's act is described by Jesus as preparation for burial — a prophetic, priestly anointing. Without fully understanding it, she participates in the passion narrative.
- 2. 'She did what she could' (Mark 14:8).** This phrase is one of the most quietly powerful in the Gospels. Jesus does not require brilliance, strategy, or complete theological understanding. He honours wholehearted giving of what we have.
- 3. Remembered forever.** Jesus says Mary's act will be told 'wherever the gospel is preached.' In the ancient world, to be remembered — to have one's name and deeds spoken — was the highest honour. Ironically, we do not know her name in two of the four accounts, yet the act is preserved. The gospel has carried it for two thousand years.
- 4. The Poor will always be with you (Mark 14:7).** This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, which in context is not fatalistic resignation but an instruction to be generous precisely because the poor will always need help. Jesus is not dismissing care for the poor — he is saying that this particular moment, this particular person, will not always be present.

Reflection Questions — Part Three

Q5. Mary consistently appears at Jesus's feet across three Gospel passages. What does this posture communicate? What would it look like in your life?

Q6. Jesus says Mary anointed him for burial, yet she may not have consciously known this. How does God work through our acts of devotion even when we don't fully understand what we're doing?

Q7. Judas objected in the name of generosity but was self-serving. How do we distinguish genuine stewardship concerns from rationalising our own withholding from God?

Q8. 'She did what she could.' What does it mean for you to give what you have — fully, without reservation — rather than waiting until you have more?

Comparing the Two Accounts

These are two distinct events involving two different women. The table below highlights the key similarities and differences:

Feature	Luke 7:36–50	John 12 / Mark 14
Woman	Unnamed; 'a sinner'	Mary of Bethany
Location	Simon's house, Galilee (near Nain?)	Simon the Leper's / Lazarus's house, Bethany
Timing	Early Galilean ministry	6 days before Passover / final week
Ointment	Unspecified perfume, alabaster flask	Pure nard (~300 denarii), alabaster flask
Where anointed	His feet	His feet (John) / head (Matthew, Mark)
Hair	Wiped feet with her hair	Wiped feet with her hair
Critics	Simon (internally)	Judas / the disciples
Jesus's response	'Your sins are forgiven; your faith saved you'	'She has done a beautiful thing; she will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached'
Theological focus	Forgiveness, faith, love as fruit of grace	Devotion, prophetic anointing, extravagant love

A Note on Conflation

In the 6th century, Pope Gregory I conflated the unnamed woman of Luke 7, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene into a single composite figure, identifying all three as the same repentant prostitute. This conflation has no biblical basis. Most Western Bibles have perpetuated this confusion, but the Eastern Orthodox Church always maintained the distinction, and the Catholic Church formally acknowledged the error in 1969 when it separated the liturgical feasts of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany. The women are distinct individuals with distinct stories.

What the Flask Holds — Theological Synthesis

The Alabaster as Symbol

Alabaster appears in the Old Testament as a luxury material used in Solomon's Temple (1 Chronicles 29:2) and in descriptions of royal beauty (Song of Solomon 5:15). In the Song of Solomon 1:3, the beloved says the lover's name is 'like perfume poured out.' The imagery of precious fragrance poured in love runs throughout Scripture as a metaphor for worship and devotion.

Psalms 141:2 uses incense and lifted hands as images of prayer rising to God. 2 Corinthians 2:14–15 describes the knowledge of Christ spreading 'like a fragrance' everywhere believers go. Ephesians 5:2 says Christ 'gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' The anointing stories sit within this wider biblical theology of fragrance as worship.

The Cross Connection

Both stories are anointing stories. In Jewish tradition, anointing with oil had three primary uses:

- **Priestly consecration** — setting apart for holy service (Exodus 30:30)
- **Royal anointing** — marking a king (1 Samuel 16:13; 1 Kings 1:39)
- **Burial preparation** — honouring the dead (Mark 16:1; John 19:39–40)

The word 'Christ' (Greek: Christos) and 'Messiah' (Hebrew: Mashiach) both mean 'Anointed One.' In a profound irony, these women anoint the Anointed One. The one who is both King and Priest and who will be laid in a tomb is anointed by women who may not fully grasp what they are doing, yet are participating in the fulfillment of all three offices.

The Economy of Grace

The critics in both stories calculate. Simon calculates reputation (a prophet should know). Judas calculates utility (sell it for the poor). Both forms of calculation miss what is actually happening. Grace operates outside the economy of utility. It is not efficient; it is lavish. It is not strategic; it is responsive. The women respond to what they have received, or what they perceive in Jesus, with the full weight of what they have.

This is the recurring logic of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels: the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45–46), the prodigal's father who runs and throws a party (Luke 15:20–24), the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine for one (Luke 15:4–6). Grace that counts cost is not grace. Love that withholds from calculation is not yet love.

Callout

"Love that has been forgiven much does not calculate the cost of its devotion. It breaks the flask. It pours it all out."

Reflection Questions — Part Five

Q9. The blog post asks: 'What would you break?' What is the 'alabaster flask' in your life — the thing of great value that you are holding sealed, unwilling to pour out?

Q10. Both women were received and defended by Jesus. Where do you need to trust that Jesus receives what you bring, even if others dismiss it as excessive, inappropriate, or wasteful?

Q11. How does this understanding of lavish devotion change your posture in corporate worship, prayer, or giving?

Going Deeper — Further Study

Cross-References for Personal Study

Theme	Reference	Relevance
Forgiveness & Debt	Luke 7:41–43	The two debtors parable — foundational to the whole passage.
Women as disciples	Luke 8:1–3	Jesus travels with women disciples who support his ministry.
Mary at his feet	Luke 10:38–42	Mary choosing to listen over serving — Jesus's affirmation.
Lazarus raised	John 11:1–44	Context for the Bethany household and what preceded the anointing.
The anointing (Mark)	Mark 14:3–9	Parallel account with 'she did what she could.'
The anointing (Matthew)	Matthew 26:6–13	Parallel with collective disciple objection.
Song of Solomon 1:12	Song 1:12; 4:13–14	Nard in the OT — fragrance as intimacy.
Fragrance as worship	2 Corinthians 2:14–15	The aroma of Christ in the NT.
Sacrificial offering	Ephesians 5:2	Christ as fragrant offering — theological background.
The Pearl of Great Price	Matthew 13:45–46	Selling everything for what is most valuable.
The Anointed One	1 Samuel 16:13	David anointed as king — Messianic background.

A Note on the Four Gospel Accounts

There are four anointing-related passages: Luke 7:36–50 (Galilee, early ministry), and Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, John 12:1–8 (Bethany, final week). The Bethany accounts are generally regarded as three tellings of the same event. Matthew and Mark locate it at 'the home of Simon the Leper'; John places it at the home of Lazarus. These are not necessarily contradictory — Simon may have been a relative, or the term may refer to a previously healed man whose house they all knew. John also differs from Matthew/Mark in that he specifies the perfume was poured on Jesus's feet, while Matthew and Mark say his head. It is possible Mary poured on both, or that the accounts emphasise different parts of the same act.

CLOSING

A Closing Prayer & Personal Response

End your study time — alone or as a group — with this prayer, or one in your own words:

Lord Jesus,

We come to you like these women — with what we have, with what we've been through, with what we've done and what has been done to us.

We don't always know the right words. We don't always understand what we're doing. We sometimes feel the weight of judgment — from others, or from ourselves.

*But you receive what we bring. You defend what we pour out.
You see us — really see us — and you do not turn away.*

Teach us to break what needs to be broken. To stop calculating the cost of our devotion. To love you with everything we are — past, present, and future.

*May our lives be like the fragrance that filled those rooms.
May you be worth everything to us.*

Amen.

Personal Response

As you close, take a moment to write one specific response — something you feel called to 'break open' and pour out before God.

What is my alabaster flask?

What step will I take this week?

Study guide based on 'The Alabaster Flask' — published 26 March 2026. Scripture quotations from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.