

# “Holy Waste”

Scripture: I Kings 17:7-16; Luke 7:36-50  
Lewis Galloway

March 8, 2026



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I Kings 17:7-16

Luke 7:36-50

We are practical people. We want to know what a thing does, how it works, what it is worth and how we get it. We want to be good stewards of our resources. The early Calvinists were taught to live simply, to dress plainly, and to avoid ostentation. We like our lives to be orderly, controlled, and balanced. We see a problem; we want to fix it. We can't stand waste and inefficiency. We look for ways to conserve, recycle, and economize. Most of the time, this pragmatic spirit is a blessing. Sometimes a pragmatic spirit gets in the way of real life.

Early in our marriage we served two small rural churches and we counted every penny. Our anniversary was rolling around and I knew that Bunny loved the gift of flowers. Being of a practical turn of mind, I thought, “Well, if I buy rose bushes then she will have roses all year round.” On the day of our anniversary when she saw those plants, I got the clear message that rose bushes are not the same thing as a dozen red roses. Some of us are slow learners. One Christmas not so many years later I got Bunny a book of car wash tickets for the new car that she had purchased that fall. I found a small jewelry box that was just the right size to use for wrapping the tickets. When she opened that small jewelry box and found the car wash tickets, I

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finally got the picture that there are times that call for something more than rose bushes and car wash tickets.

There is another side of life. There are moments in our lives when we come face to face with the impractical, the magnanimous and the downright extravagant. In the Gospel of Luke, we find just such a moment. Jesus has spoken to the crowds about how sinners and tax collectors welcome the message of John the Baptist and are baptized, but the scribes and Pharisees reject him. Yet, for a reason we do not know, Jesus is invited to be a guest in the home of a Pharisee. A bitter scent of religious irony fills the air. While Jesus is reclining at the table, an unnamed woman enters the room. She is only identified as a woman of the city and a sinner. Standing behind Jesus, she weeps. She bathes the feet of Jesus with her tears and dries them with her unbound hair. She opens an alabaster jar of expensive perfumed ointment and lavishes it upon his feet. She doesn't stop kissing his feet and rubbing them with the perfume. As the scent of the perfume fills the room, a cry of shock and disgust rises from the host. Allowing this sinful woman to perform such disgraceful acts is proof enough that Jesus is not the prophet some claim him to be.

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It is an extraordinary moment – a precious moment – a holy moment. The moment becomes a study in contrasts. Only now is it revealed how inhospitable the host has been in contrast to the extravagant grace of an unnamed, sinful woman. Jesus tells a parable to illustrate the difference between the host and the intruder. The debtor who is forgiven the greater debt has the most love. The Pharisee did not even practice the common hospitality of the day. The Pharisee did not welcome Jesus with a kiss for an honored guest or water and oil to wash and soothe his feet. The sinful woman has bathed his feet with her tears, dried them with her unbound hair, and anointed them with precious oil. Experiencing the lavish grace of God leads her to acts of extravagant gratitude. The words of the hymn we will sing convey so powerfully her experience of God’s love for sinners like us:

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small;  
love so amazing so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.

Paul Tillich, from whom I borrowed the title of his sermon, speaks of this woman’s act as “holy waste” that flows from the abundant love of the heart. He writes that the early church “knew that without the abundance of the heart, nothing great can happen. They knew that religion within the limits of reasonableness is a mutilated religion, and that calculating love is

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not love at all... The history of mankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so” (*Holy Waste*, in *The New Being*, pp. 46, 47).

The book of Kings tells us that in a time of drought and famine the prophet Elijah encounters the widow of Zarephath. He is a great prophet of Israel and she is a poor, hungry foreigner who has all but given up hope for life. He asks her to bring him water, a precious commodity in a time of drought. Then he asks for bread. She has nothing but a bit of oil and meal which she has saved to prepare a final meal before she and her son die of starvation. In spite of her desperation, she bakes bread first for the prophet and then for herself and son. It may seem like an insignificant act, but when your child is starving to death the last thing you want to do is give your food to a stranger. Yet, what this outsider to the house of Israel does with water and a bit of bread becomes an extravagant gesture, a magnanimous act of faith.

I remember a moment of profound grace when a family invited me to their home to be with them as their elderly father was dying. Several generations of the family had gathered in the house. His wife and children were in the room with him. In those last hours they shared their extravagant love, said their precious goodbyes and joined in faithful prayer. Before he died, like

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Jacob of old, he blessed them. As death came, a deep peace filled the room like the fragrance of costly perfume. It was a holy moment.

Most of the time, we need to face our day-to-day responsibilities with dedication, careful planning, and practical thinking. We need to be responsible citizens, good parents and hard workers. My smart phone reminds me when I need to leave to make a meeting on time, then it gives me step by step directions of how to get there. But there are holy places that not even Google maps can discern, and sacred times that Outlook calendar cannot chart.

There are moments that stand out from the ordinary flow of time; moments that demand something more of us. We do not live by bread alone. The practical is not enough. Thank God for great artists, inspired composers, and talented architects who see what God is doing and create powerful art, sacred music, and Gothic cathedrals. Thank God for people who, in gratitude to God, establish hospitals, schools, and community ministries. Thank God for those who, in the midst of the busyness of life, take time to laugh, to embrace a friend, to spend time with a child, and to give thanks for the sheer wonder of life. Thank God for the faithful who are moved by the lavish grace of God to build a Habitat home for a stranger, to tutor a child at Westerly Hills with the Augustine Literacy Project, to provide hospitality and a nourishing

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dinner at Room in the Inn for a homeless mother and three children, to go on a mission trip, to make a pastoral visit to a detention camp, or to provide money and labor for our food pantry Nourish Up.

We cannot let the ticking clock be the measure of our lives. In T.S. Eliot’s poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the speaker in an almost dreamlike state wonders about the meaning of his days. He sees himself growing older, balder, and thinner. He contemplates his failure of nerve and his missed opportunities. He is afraid and uneasy about asking the eternal questions. He has known the questions and known the people who have crowded his life. He muses:

“For I have known them all already, known them all:  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;”

When God has lavished so much grace upon us, we cannot measure our lives by coffee spoons. We cannot define ourselves solely in terms of what we do. We cannot determine the value of our lives apart from God. When we see God’s hand behind acts of forgiveness and generosity,

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moments of great courage and sacrifice, and times of rebirth and reconciliation, then we move beyond the practical to acts of holy waste.

Thank God for those who “waste” their precious time in worship. Theologian Marva Dawn describes Christian worship as a waste of time. She writes:

“To worship the Lord is – in the world’s eyes – a waste of time. It is, indeed, a royal waste of time... By engaging in it, we don’t accomplish anything useful in our society’s terms... Worship... immerses us in the regal splendor of the King of the cosmos... Worship of such a God [equips us] with the ability and humility to waste time in the love of neighbor. (*Introduction, A Royal Waste of Time*)

It is good to be practical. In the midst of our practicality, it is even better to recognize those moments that call for acts of holy waste - making sure all the children of Charlotte have sufficient food, taking the time from an all-too-busy schedule to meet a lonely friend for coffee, or sending flowers for no special reason except to say, “I love you.”

We are here because at some point we have discovered that what we do here in worship, service, and spiritual community is not a waste of time, but the secret to the meaning of time.

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Each one of us is given an alabaster jar filled with precious perfume. Do you know what it is? It is your life. The person you are; the gifts you have. It is you. If we live only by carefully measured coffee spoons, then we will miss what it is to share in the extravagant grace of God.

Where is the place and what is the time for you to break open the alabaster jar and pour out the precious perfume of your life as a gift of holy waste for God?