

Acts 20:20-24

March 10, 2019

John 12:1-8

Costly Devotion

Dining With Friends

We know that Jesus spent time at the home of sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, in the village of Bethany, just a couple miles from Jerusalem. In fact, on a previous visit, **Lazarus was the man Jesus had raised from the grave – everyone in town knew of this miracle.**

[John says this took place six days before the Passover, in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Matthew and Mark says it was two days before the Passover in the home of Simon the Leper. Matthew and Mark report that it was “a woman” who anointed Jesus with costly perfumed oil, while John says it was Mary. We know nothing of this Simon the Leper, other than what is mentioned in the Bible. Is he family to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus? Was he their father, and this his home? It is doubtful he was a leper at the time of this meal, because people would not have dined in the house of one still afflicted. We might assume that the Lord had healed him. Still, he was known as “The Leper” so as to distinguish him from many other Simons, it being a relatively common name.]

Most likely it was the men who were at the dinner table (they didn't sit in chairs, but reclined on benches/couches) when Mary came into the room. Some may have assumed that she was waiting on the table. Instead she began anointing the Lord with very expensive perfume [Matthew & Mark say his head, John his feet)].

Last week we heard how the prophet Samuel was directed by God to anoint David as the new king of ancient Israel. Samuel anointed David with oil to symbolize that he was God's chosen... God's chosen vessel to work through, yet in submission to the Lord Who chose him. [The Levitical priests of the Old Testament were anointed with oil. The oil was to symbolize their being set apart (sanctified or made holy) for the purposes of God, whether that was to sit on a king's throne or serve in the temple.]

Mary's anointing is not to announce who Jesus was – that anointing was done by the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism. Mary's act was an act of gratitude to the Lord.

Unrestrained Devotion

She used “nard,” a hardy herb, (a member Valerianaceae family) that grows in the foothills of the Himalayas. It's rhizomes (underground stems) are rich in essential oil. When crushed and distilled it produces an intensely aromatic, amber-colored, thick oil. Nard oil was used as a perfume, incense, and an herbal medicine. All in the room with Jesus would have recognized the aroma. Both Matthew and Mark mention that the perfume was in an alabaster jar –

underlining how precious it was. Alabaster is a hard, white stone resembling marble (one of the precious stones used in the decoration of Solomon's Temple 1 Chronicles 29:2). It was an expensive item used to carry precious things. (Mark says she broke the jar.)

A pint of pure nard was worth one person's annual income. In today's terms: let's say at minimum \$45,000. No wonder Judas objected to such "waste." If you saw someone pouring such expensive perfume on another person, the whole bottle being dumped out, I think the natural reaction would be to question "why?" We're not talking about people spending lavishly on themselves. We're talking about someone of modest means giving extravagantly to the Lord. Was Mary crazy, deceived by a charismatic figure, foolish, or did she flunk Financial Peace University?

Love that does not carry us beyond ourselves perhaps is not really true love. Love that is always sensible and calculating, never sweeping one away, is not true love. It may be warm feelings, but not genuine love. Have I ever been carried away to do something for God, not because it was my duty, nor because it was useful, but because there was nothing in it except an unrestrained devotion to Him? Have I ever realized that I cannot bring to God anything that He needs, but that I can do simple, ordinary things that give evidence to God that I am abandoned to Him? Have I ever produced in the heart of the Lord Jesus what this woman in Bethany produced? **Unrestrained devotion to God is of more value than personal holiness.**¹

Object of Glory

Judas objected: **"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?"** [Why would Judas ask thusly? It wasn't his oil to begin with.] Is the expense justified? In order to answer this question, we must answer not with "why" but "to whom." I believe there's really only two answers to this question of "to whom." It's either to ourselves or to God. **We are either glorifying ourselves, or we are glorifying God.** And the extravagance can only be justified if the worth of the object of adoration is greater than the cost of extravagance. The glory of the substance poured out can only reflect the glory of the one to whom it is being poured upon. If the object of glory is not worthy then the act would be foolish and wasteful.

Friends, how many times do our best acts of "devotion" turn out to be an instrument self-glorification? Judas was an extraordinary man with extraordinary gifts; he walked alongside the Lord when He healed the sick, delivered people from demons, and preached the good news (Matthew 10:4). He gave up everything to follow the Master. Yet, ultimately, he thought Christ had come to reign on the earth, to give him earthly powers and privileges.

His heart ultimately deceived him as his master stepped closer and closer to the cross ... the cross that would strip Jesus, and his disciples, of all earthly

privileges and power. **The only earthly possession Christ wore on the cross was the very aroma of the perfume Mary had poured upon him.** Judas betrayed the master with 30 pieces of silver; notably less than the worth of Mary's perfume.

Often, what we believe to be our adoration and offering to God turns out to be false. The Bible is full of characters who made false offerings to God. How do we know that our offerings are acceptable? One test is that true adoration and worship is always God initiated, not self-initiated - a response to what God has already done. Something comes to you, surprising and life changing, transcending everything you thought was possible. It may come in the form of an event or a person, revealing to you God's glory, the possibilities of life, at the same time greatly humbling you. [Maybe you're apprehensive and reluctant and yet, it's like an adventure inviting you to leap beyond yourself to a new life, moving out of your comfort zone, and your previous definition of God.] Such was Mary's reaction.

If your act of adoration is earning "points" with God, your actions will not ultimately please God but only yourself, becoming a dull religious code of ethics. No matter how hard you work, how much you sacrifice, you will not experience the joy overflowing. If your offering is made on the altar of self-glorification, you will find, that the glory of your own works will create a schism in your heart – pride in yourself competing with devotion to God. “It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men [and women] angels.”² Your works, your ideals will only point to the double-mindedness of your own motives and existence.

Preview of Death

“Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me,” John 12:7-8.³

Indeed, we have opportunity to help those in need, each and every day. But **how often do we express heart-felt devotion to Jesus?** And here Mary does something even more than express gratitude: she anoints Jesus for what must come next, His death. Jesus was not only willing to lay down His life for humanity; **He welcomed death on our behalf, that he might defeat it.** As believers we often say we are willing to die for Jesus, but the better question is, are we willing to live for Him?

Quite possibly Lazarus himself was sitting near Jesus when He said this. Can you imagine what it must have been like to attend this dinner party held in Jesus' honor? It's not everyday you get to dine with someone who has been raised from the dead ... but it can be an everyday occurrence to dine with Jesus. **Are you allowing Jesus to be the honored guest at your table?**

Everyone present knew that Jesus was close to Lazarus and his family and that He chose to intervene in their lives right at death's door. Whenever Jesus

chose to intervene, the glorious Prince of Peace took another lash from the reality of sin and death; the Beauty began to become the Beast. **Every time Jesus healed and forgave, he stepped closer and closer to the cross.** You see, the cross should have been for you and me, the Beasts trapped in the curse of our own doing; but Christ, the ultimate Beauty, intervened and took the punishment for us. Pouring a \$45,000 jar of perfume upon his feet is the least a Beast can do for the Beauty who loves us so unconditionally, that He sacrificed Himself for our sakes. ***“She has done a beautiful thing to me...”***

Years ago, as pastor in another congregation, I asked one Sunday of our Lay Leader: “Why don’t people sing the hymns with a little more enthusiasm?” He replied: “Only those who know they are sinners, forgiven by Jesus can really sing the praises of the Lord.”

Yes, it is so. When you know, in the depths of your soul that you are truly a sinner, broken and crushed by the weight of sin, and yet have received the forgiveness that only Jesus can give, and then the joy of salvation floods into your heart ... then, then you will be able sing God’s praises and unabashedly give to Him your extravagant gratitude. Do you know His forgiveness?

Jesus said “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” Have you?

¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, Feb. 21.

² St. Augustine.

³ Matt. 26:12: “When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.”

Mark 14:6-8 “Leave her alone ... Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.”