

# Fragrant Devotion

## John 12:1-11

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First Presbyterian Church, Coral Springs/Margate, FL, March 25, 2007

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Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (Jn. 12:3).

**J**ohn 12:1 marks a major transition in John's Gospel, beginning his account of Jesus' final week that concluded with the cross. The seven-day period that begins here is the greatest week in history.

The seven days of creation were of course of great significance. John also takes care in recording the first seven days of Jesus' ministry (see John 1:19-51). But the surpassing importance of Jesus' final week can be seen in the fact that John devotes almost half of his Gospel to it, a pattern we see reflected in the other Gospels.

Combining the Gospels, we can arrange a rough chronology of Jesus' last days. On Saturday, he dined with Lazarus and his sisters. On Sunday, Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem. He returned to Jerusalem on Monday, cursing the barren fig-tree on the way.

Tuesday saw his last public preaching in Jerusalem, concluding with Jesus' retirement to the Mount of Olives, giving the Olivet Discourse to his disciples. On Wednesday, he stayed again in Bethany, returning to the city on Thursday to observe the Passover with his disciples, after which he was arrested. That night and morning Jesus was tried, and on Friday he was crucified.<sup>1</sup>

I find it interesting to observe the difference between what John records compared with the other Gospels. While Matthew, Mark and Luke focus mainly on Jesus' public events, John writes of the private

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible, however, based on parallels between John 12:1-11 and Mark 14:1-9, that Jesus' feast with Martha, Mary and Lazarus took place on Wednesday but was placed earlier by John for thematic reasons.

fellowship Jesus enjoyed with his close circle of disciples. John seems to have personally enjoyed Jesus' intimate affection (see Jn. 13:23), and his Gospel dwells on the theme of fellowship with Christ.

## Devotion Modeled

Jesus had been staying away from Jerusalem until the time had come for his dramatic entry. But now as that time drew near he returned to Bethany. His coming was greeted with joy and thanksgiving for the recent event of Lazarus's resurrection. To celebrate Jesus' return "they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table" (Jn. 12:2).

This banquet provides a lovely portrait of different believers offering different kinds of ministry to the Lord. Martha's gift was service, and she offered it gladly. Lazarus was a great witness of Jesus' saving power, so he sat next to him at the feast. Mary was known for her deep devotion to Jesus. John recounts: "Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (Jn. 12:3).

This verse records one of the most beautiful scenes from the life of Jesus. Mary stands out for her portrait of loving devotion, displaying five features of devotion to Christ that all of us should emulate.

First, Mary's devotion was *courageous*. Chapter 11 concluded with ominous news from the religious leaders, who broadcast that anyone who knew where Jesus was "should let them know, so that they might arrest him" (Jn. 11:57). One who failed to do this would likely be accused as an accessory alongside Jesus. Yet Mary and the others openly hosted Jesus for this meal. As we learn, Lazarus was in particular danger, since the rulers sought to eliminate him as the evidence of Jesus' miracle. Nonetheless, these courageous disciples placed their devotion to Christ ahead of their own safety.

Secondly, Mary exhibited a *costly* devotion. She "took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard" to anoint Jesus. This would have been a bottle of perfumed oil of the highest quality. Judas claimed that its value was "three hundred denarii," roughly a year's

wages for a working man, or tens of thousands of dollars in today's money. This was the very highest quality and most expensive oil.

Some commentators conclude from this that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus must have been wealthy. If this is the case, they set a good example for those with great financial means today. One of the dangers of wealth is that it creates an appetite for pleasure and valuable things. Statistics show that rich people tend to give away a smaller portion of their money than poorer people do. But Mary was not this way. If she could afford valuable things, she also did not hesitate to give them lovingly to Jesus.

But it is quite possible that Mary was not a wealthy person. This jar of oil may have been a family legacy or a unique treasure she had acquired. Whatever the case, her devotion was such that she delighted to offer the very best that she had to show her love for the Master. Thinking nothing of herself, her great delight was to give her very best for Jesus' blessing.

Mary's gift challenges us regarding the price we are willing to pay as disciples of Jesus. Another way to approach this is to ask what is your most treasured possession. Is it your stock portfolio? If so, then one way you can place Jesus first is to give sacrificially from your treasured assets out of love for him. Is it your lifestyle? Then you should consider giving up recreation to do service in the church or to share the gospel with others. Is it the standard of living you provide for your family, which you would not give up to go into Christian work? Is it the self-image that worldly acceptance provides you, so that you will not boldly identify yourself as a Christian? If so, you should examine your heart and recalculate the value of the Lord Jesus Christ, drawing near to him to cultivate the costly devotion of Mary.

F. B. Meyer tells of an occasion when a preacher suggested that his hearers make a love offering to Jesus of something that was especially precious. We love to give costly gifts to each other, so why not make a costly gift to Jesus? As the offering plate was passed, jewels and other valuable items filled the trays. But among them was something especially precious. An older woman had given a note that stated that her daughter had long wanted to go to far lands as a missionary, but she had stood in her way, not wanting to part with her. Now, out of

her love for Christ she would stand in the way no longer, but would give her daughter up to Jesus to spread his gospel in the world.<sup>2</sup>

What a blessing it is when our awareness of the priceless love of Christ has set us free from our need to possess people and things. If we have Jesus, we have everything we could ever really want or need. But sometimes we have to let go of other things we love to recognize the preciousness of Christ.

Thirdly, Mary's was a *humble* devotion. The use of perfume was customary for special events. This was a time when bathing was infrequent, and the hot climate produced body odors. A host would place a daub of oil on the head or face of guests, but Mary's devotion was such that she did far more for Jesus. With Jesus reclined at the low table and his legs extended outwards, Mary proceeded not only to anoint Jesus' head but also his feet.

This is noteworthy because it was considered beneath people to wash the feet of others. Then, even slaves had rights, and one of their rights was that they did not have to touch their master's feet, since dirty feet are particularly unpleasant. But Mary did not hesitate to wash and anoint Jesus' feet. Joseph Ryan comments: "Mary is giving up her rights before the Lord. There is nothing He cannot ask of her. Touching his feet becomes her pledge of unconditional service."<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, Mary's humility before Jesus arose from her awareness of who he was. If she did know previously, his raising of her brother proved his deity as the very Son of God. So for Mary, any service to Jesus was an honor and pleasure, an occasion to worship him and show thanks for what he had done. Like Isaiah in the temple, when he saw the vision of the Lord in his glorious majesty, Mary's response to any occasion to serve in any way was "Here am I! Send me" (Isa. 6:8). In contrast, those who hold back from service to Christ, especially humble service, can only be those who have not comprehended the grace and glory of God in the face of Christ.

Mary's devotion to Christ was more than humble; it can only be described as *extravagant*. If the disciples who looked on were amazed when she anointed Jesus' feet, they were shocked when she "wiped

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<sup>2</sup> F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Love* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1987), 190.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph "Skip" Ryan, *That You May Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 249.

his feet with her hair.” It was scandalous for a woman to unbind her hair in public. A married woman could be divorced by her husband for this and a single woman could even be stoned. For a woman to let down her hair expressed intimacy, openness, and fervent love, and it was done only in the privacy of the home amidst close family members. So by not only unbinding her hair but using it to wipe Jesus’ feet, Mary expressed a completely surrendered devotion in which nothing was held back. She knew she was completely safe in his holy presence, and seeing him as her divine Lord she desired that nothing stand between her devotion and him.

Where did Mary get this devotion? The answer is found in every Gospel account in which she is seen, in each of which she is found sitting at Jesus’ feet. Mary had turned her attention to Jesus, had noted how different he was from everyone else, had listened to his teaching, and had given him her heart. Everyone who draws near to Jesus this way will also feel the kind of devotion for him that she displayed.

A similar example was a man who wanted to be a preacher but lacked the needed gifts. He became a successful businessman and earned a great deal of money. But he always wanted to do something for Jesus, so he helped open up a mission hall in the center of a major city. After the mission closed each Friday, he would arrive in working clothes with a bucket of water and a brush. On his knees he scrubbed the floor and washed the chairs. For quite a while, no one knew of this service. But on Saturday some men from his company went into the mission and found him scrubbing. “You shouldn’t be doing this!” they cried. “We will do it ourselves, or pay someone else to do it.” But he objected. “No,” he said, “please let me do it. I want to do it for Jesus’ sake.” That is precisely the point: “for Jesus’ sake.” Whatever we can do we also should do out of hearts surrendered to him.<sup>4</sup>

John provides one last detail of Mary’s humble service that is especially lovely. He writes that after Mary anointed Jesus’ feet and washed them with her hair, as she moved about “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Her devotion to Jesus was *fragrant*. The perfume was in her hair, so that wherever she went the

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<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:920.

fragrance of her gift to Jesus was spread. What greater blessing could we have than this! And what greater blessing could we give to others! “If you are not a blessing to others, if knowing you does not make others think of Jesus, if your life seems dry and unprofitable, do what Mary did. Get down on your knees before Jesus and give him your all. Pour your life out before him.”<sup>5</sup>

## Devotion Challenged

**I**t is sometimes quipped that no good deed goes unpunished. Whether that is true or not, it is true that genuine devotion to Christ never goes unchallenged. So it was for Mary: “Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’” (Jn. 12:4-5). Here is a challenge that is frequently made against the passionate devotion to Jesus displayed by Mary. It is better, many would argue, to do practical good works instead of spending time with the Lord.

This is a spirit very much alive today. Preachers hear people complain that sermons focus on the glories of Christ rather than the practical needs of their own lives. Whenever time or treasures are offered up simply to exalt the glory of Jesus, some will complain that they could have been better used for the interests of man. Many people echo Judas’ opinion today, little realizing who they are quoting. William Hendricksen writes, “Judas is the type of man who has money on his mind all the while. He views everything from the aspect of pecuniary value.”<sup>6</sup> What a contrast he presents to Mary, who viewed everything from the aspect of the glory of Christ.

But there is a second objection to Mary’s devotion to Jesus, one that the former is often employed to mask. John writes, “[Judas] said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it” (Jn. 12:6).

Judas proves how persuasively a hypocrite can play the role of a disciple, even one entrusted with high privileges. It is interesting that

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<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 294.

<sup>6</sup> William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:177.

Jesus, who surely knew that Judas was a thief if John did, should nonetheless place Judas in charge of the money donated to support the disciples. Jesus was evidently no more afraid of what Judas might do by stealing than by what Judas would do by betraying him.

Mary's devotion offended Judas because his focus in religion was on gaining for himself. All he could think of when Mary poured her oil on Jesus was the money he might have taken for himself if it was sold. Mary broke her bottle to give all that she had to Jesus, while Judas wanted to break into the money pouch to take from Jesus. We should be warned if there are signs of Judas's thinking in our hearts, coming to church without any devotion to Jesus, seeking only business contacts or social benefits. Judas' greed led him to betray Jesus, making his among the most reviled names in all of history and ultimately costing him his very soul.

Jesus spoke out to defend Mary: "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me" (Jn. 12:7-8). Jesus was not speaking callously about the poor; all through the Gospels, his concern for mercy is obvious. Rather, he argues that our concern for the problems of this world should not displace our worship of the Savior from heaven. Gordon Keddie explains: "At that moment..., they stood at the hinge of history. Jesus would not always be with them... Salvation itself was about to be secured for the world that Jesus had come to save."<sup>7</sup> Since Jesus was about to die on the cross, the very best use of the oil was the anointing of his body. Indeed, it is probable that through all the events to come – Jesus' arrest, his unjust trial, his cruel murder, and his burial in the tomb – the fragrance of Mary's devotion still clung to his body.

## Devotion Threatened

**T**his account of Jesus' anointing provides a model of devotion and answers a challenge to devotion to him. But devotion to Jesus is also threatened with deadly violence: "So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus" (Jn. 12:10-11).

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press, ), I:453.

If devoted Mary threatened Judas's conscience, resurrected Lazarus threatened far more to the hostile Jewish leaders. Her devotion offered a lasting memorial to the divine glory of Christ, but Lazarus's witness offered a memorial to the divine power of Christ. Indeed, as people learned that Jesus had returned to Bethany, they were just as fascinated to see Lazarus as they were to see the Lord. John states: "When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead" (Jn. 12:8).

Lazarus was an unlikely "star witness" for Jesus as the Messiah. Nothing outstanding about him is ever recorded in the Gospels and he never says anything worth recording. So what is it about Lazarus that makes his witness so powerful? "The answer is not in what Lazarus did for Jesus," writes Kent Hughes. "It is in what Jesus did for Lazarus." The same is true of every Christian. "If we were dead in our sins, and if over us a voice has cried, 'Come forth,' and if we have risen to newness of life and the Master has said, 'Unbind him, and let him go,' so that now we are free, then we have become unanswerable arguments for Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup>

Lazarus was a threat to the rule of the leaders who hated Jesus, as well as to the fragile peace they sought with the Romans. For this reason, the fact that he had so publicly died and been raised by Jesus was a serious problem for them. J. C. Ryle writes: "They could not deny the fact of his having been raised again. Living, and moving, and eating, and drinking within two miles of Jerusalem, after lying four days in the grave, Lazarus was a witness to the truth of Christ's Messiahship, whom they could not possibly answer or put to silence."<sup>9</sup> For this reason, "the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well" (Jn. 12:10). Matthew Henry observed, "God will have Lazarus to live by a miracle, and they will have him to die by malice."<sup>10</sup> Caiaphas had begun by declaring that it would be better for one man to die for the nation (Jn. 11:50), but already there would be two. Before the Caiaphas's of history are finished, millions of Christ's followers will

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<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *John: That You May Believe*, 295.

<sup>9</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:350.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 5:864.

die for their witness to Jesus, yet not one Christian death will effectively stop the spread of the gospel.

Christians should not be surprised to be similarly threatened for their Christian witness. Burying the evidence is a tactic as ancient as Caiaphas and as modern as the daily newspaper. But realize that it is only the guilty who take such a course of action. And since Satan wants above all to bury or at least obscure the evidence of God's saving power at work in the world, Christians should not only be zealous to give their witness but should feed their own faith on the proofs for the claims of Christ, both those in the Bible and those living among us in the church today.

So does your faith in Christ challenge others to consider the gospel? Is your life threatening to unbelief? Are you able to tell people why they should believe on Jesus, and are they able to find convincing proofs of salvation in your life? If we continue in the noble line of Mary and Lazarus, we can be certain that others will see the truth of Jesus in our lives, and what was said of Lazarus will be said of us as well: "On account of him (or her), many were... believing in Jesus" (Jn. 12:11).

## Devotion Rewarded

**T**he devotion for Jesus that was modeled by Mary, challenged by Judas, and threatened by the corrupt leaders was richly rewarded by the Lord. We can anticipate two rewards as seen in the experience of Mary and Lazarus.

One reward is pointed to in Jesus' defense of Mary. Through her fervent devotion she gained understanding of the salvation he was soon to achieve. I say this because it seems that she alone, among all the disciples, understood that Jesus was about to offer himself for our sins. This understanding is hinted at in John's record of Jesus' words: "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial" (Jn. 12:7). But in Mark's parallel account we read even stronger words. There, Jesus said, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial" (Mk. 14:8). How did Mary understand what even Peter, the chief disciple, did not yet comprehend? Because she had attended lovingly and searchingly on Jesus' teaching, and thus had learned of his approaching cross.

Our devotion is similarly rewarded when applied to the study of God's Word. So do you study the Bible the way Mary applied herself to Jesus' teaching? Do you sit at Christ's feet with the Scriptures open, your soul hungering for the bread of God's Word? If you do and if you will, your devotion will be rewarded not merely with increased knowledge but with the transforming of your mind and heart so that like Mary you will leave the fragrance of Christ wherever you go.

The other reward is suggested by the experience of Lazarus. The voice of Christ had brought him new life, with the effect that he shared in Jesus' suffering at the hands of the world. The cross that awaited Jesus was also intended for him. We don't know the story of Lazarus' subsequent life, but he apparently escaped the leaders' plot or was simply forgotten after Jesus died. But Jesus rose from the grave, and there can be little doubt that Lazarus was one of those who fellowshiped with Jesus in his resurrection life. Jesus had said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk. 9:24). Likewise, those whose living witness to Jesus brings them into trouble in the world can be certain to reap the reward of eternal life in the age to come. For, Jesus said, "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 10:32).